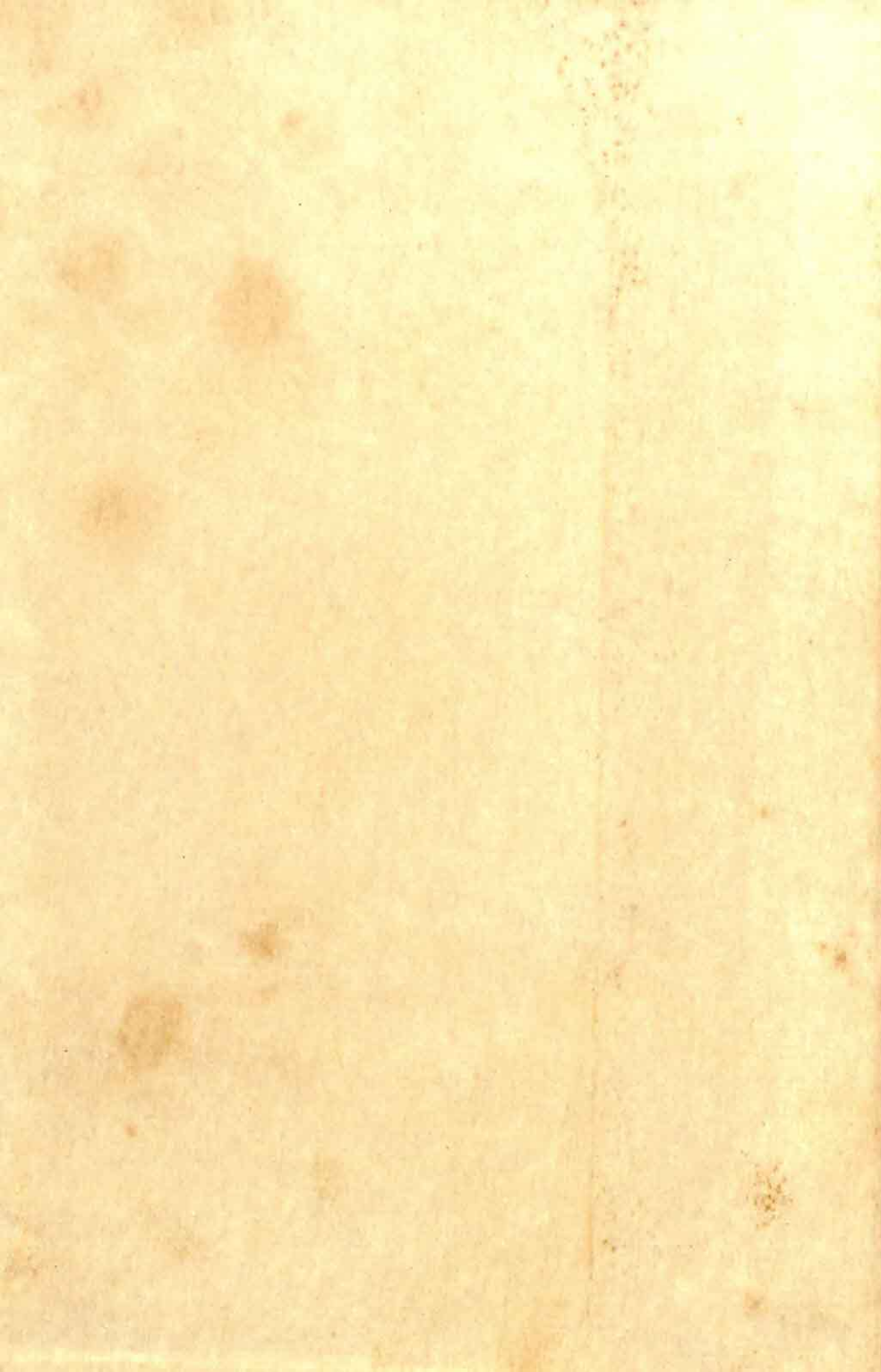


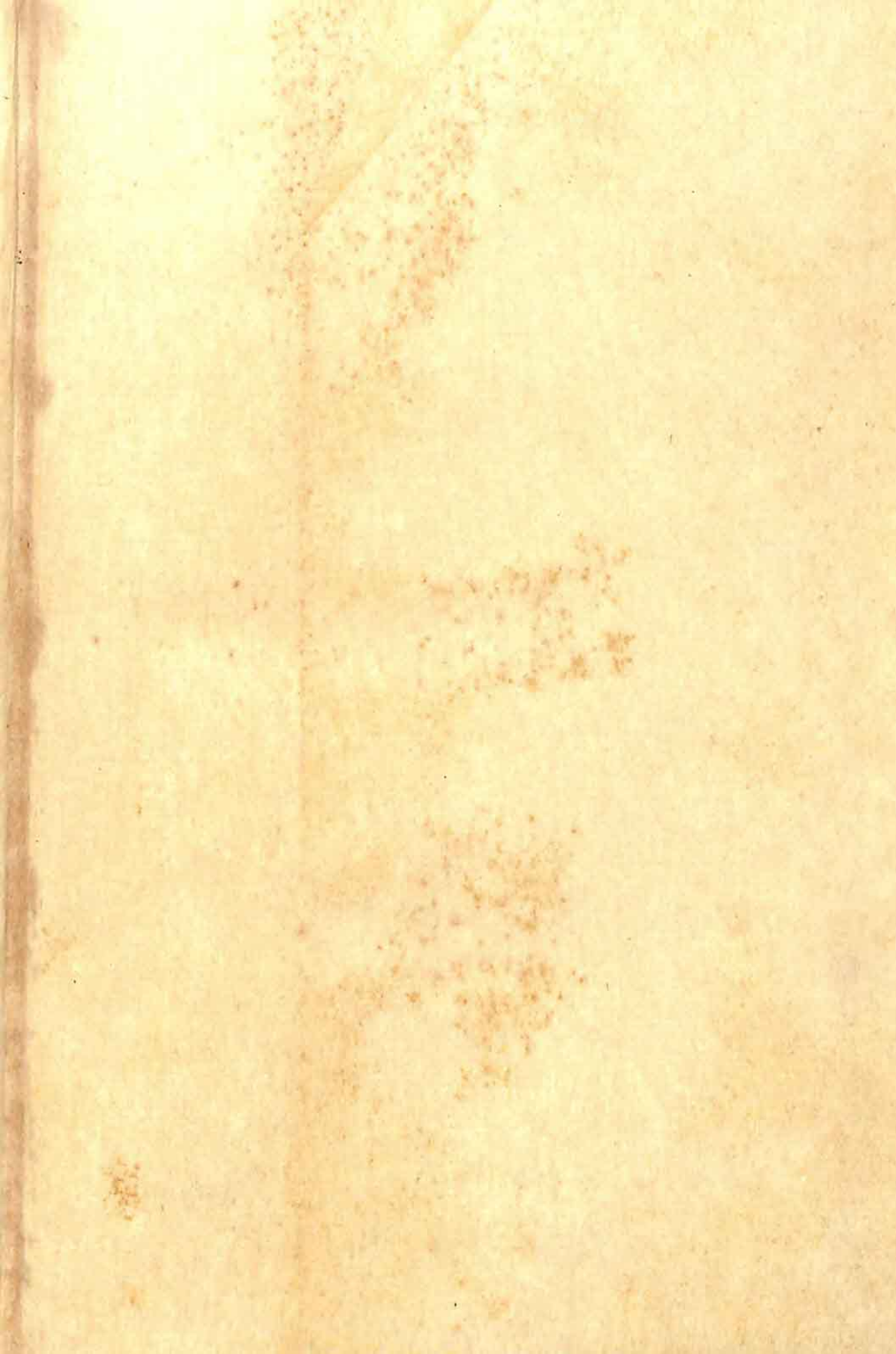
# Scheduled Castes at the Cross Roads



**C. PARVATHAMMA**









# **SCHEDULED CASTES AT THE CROSS ROADS**

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*TO THE MEMORY  
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## PREFACE

The initial conception of this volume arose out of a concern with the accumulation of different disabilities which affect Indian Untouchables. This concern has been shared by many who have produced elaborate plans or have worried in private. Several years ago I decided to try an unconventional way of understanding the economic, social and political problems of the downtrodden.

The Scheduled Castes and Tribes, the reservation policy seem to inspire a large chunk of population in the sub-continent. Can this become a mechanism for upliftment of all the poor and deserving and the end of caste snobbaries? We will have to wait and see.

The book is a collection of articles written during the seventies and eighties. Some of them have been published in journals other papers were presented in International and National conferences and seminars.

While writing the papers in the past and now getting them ready for the press, some of my colleagues have evinced keen interest in discussing the nature of problems and the theme itself is enigmatic over the decades. I acknowledge with gratitude the painstaking work that has been put in here by Sri Satyanarayana, Department of Studies in Sociology, University of Mysore, Mysore Manasagangotri. He has shown tenacity to put up with extra demands amidst his own work.

Many thanks to the editors of the journals and books given below for permitting me to reprint the articles included in this volume :

*Social Democracy* for permission to include my paper on "Social stratification, traditional, values and modern forces in contemporary India" ;

*United Asia* for "The case for Indian Untouchables" ;

*The Eastern Anthropologist* "Ambedkar and After : the position and future of Indian Scheduled Caste masses and classes";

*The Journal of Karnataka University—Social Sciences* for "India's Scheduled Castes M.Ps : A socio-economic profile" ;

*Sociological Bulletin* for "The Weaker sections of society—The Scheduled Castes in India".

I am indebted to Professor V.K.R.V.Rao (ed) *Planning for Change*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1975, to reprint my paper "The problems of inequality and social justice": Dr. Jose Kannanaikal (ed.) *The Scheduled Castes*, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi, 1981 for "Caste and Conversion movements in India" ; and to Professor Rajashekariah (ed.) *Ambedkar memorial publications III*, Karnataka University, Dharwad, 1983, for "Ambedkar's analysis of Hindu social order."

The articles "Crisis of Scheduled Caste leadership and Karnataka politics" was accepted by VIII World Congress of Sociology, Toronto, Canada. 1974 and "Panchayati Raj and Weaker Sections" was discussed at the ICSSR Seminar held at Administrative Staff College, Hyderabad during 1975. I am grateful for the opportunity to revise and elaborate those ideas here.

Finally I thank Messrs Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi for having brought out the book in time.

C. PARVATHAMMA

Mysore

August, 1989

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# I

## INTRODUCTION

The book is a collection of ten papers published in some of the journals and others presented in conferences and seminars during the past two decades or so.

In the article on Ambedkar and after I have tried to show the position and future of Scheduled Castes. The present title of the book stems mainly from this. Ambedkar at the turn of the 20th century focused the attention of the world to the awful position and plight of the Indian Scheduled Castes, variously known as Panchamas, Outcastes, Anthyajias, Depressed Classes, Achut and finally rechristened as 'Harijans' by Mahatma Gandhi. However, all these are blanket terms. Scheduled Caste is a nomenclature given to a cluster of castes and sub-castes which are listed in a Schedule that does not necessarily carry attributes of untouchability but infact colloquially it has come to imply exactly the same.

Ambedkar began to wage a relectless war against caste system and Hinduism. For the roots of untouchability are embedded in caste system, which in turn is supported by Hinduism. The solution to the problem was not in sight, but he used several techniques and methods to fight for the eradication of untouchability. He succeeded in creating an awareness among the fellow untouchables and some liberal caste Hindus about the problem. It was a stupendous task for a single person to handle successfully.

The social, economic, political, religious and educational problems enveloping untouchability are too numerous. There are innumerable castes and sub-castes among Scheduled Castes with a graded hierarchy. Ambedkar succeeded in getting the "communal award" from the British rulers regarding the political representation. But Gandhi offered a stiff fight and undertook "fast unto death" thus forcing Ambedkar to sign the famous "Poona Pact" in 1932. With this the first phase of the struggle was set at naught Gandhi as a staunch Hindu a *sanatani* won in the battle with a slogan of 'change of heart' to atone the practice of untouchability on the part of Hindus. Gandhi described untouchability as an appendage to Hinduism and as such found nothing in religion.

For nearly another two decades Ambedkar kept up the fight. He was a thorough going critique of Gandhi for the rest of his life. When India became independent in 1947, and the constituent assembly was formed, Ambedkar was invited to participate, act as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee. It was this opportunity which gave Ambedkar a new lease of life to carry out this cherished ideals.

Untouchability stands abolished according to the Constitution, its practice in any form is made a cognizable offence subsequently. Ambedkar mapped out the practice of untouchability and all its ramifications. The socio-religious discrimination was tackled by making provisions for entry to public places like temples and other utility services. Then the most important factors consisted of political, economic and educational opportunities to these people. The principle of reservation or what is now commonly described as protective discrimination was adopted in the constitution. Accordingly political representation on the basis of reservation to Scheduled Castes is available for State Assemblies and Parliament now extended to Village Panchayats as well.

Several ameliorative measures are introduced to help Scheduled Castes to improve economically with a sound economic background it is possible for a Scheduled Caste to venture and fight back his oppressors—caste Hindus.

Formal education helps in several ways *i.e.*, it dispels ignorance, superstition, makes one more knowledgeable. In the Indian context formal education is linked to services so that a qualified Scheduled Caste can secure a job-strengthen his economic position and perhaps act as a guide, friend and philosopher to follow SCs. So reservation of seats in educational institution and jobs in government departments now including private organizations, institutions has been there. Scholarships, fellowships, hostel facilities and many more schemes of help are made available.

From this stage Ambedkar envisaged the onward march of Scheduled Castes, though he knew it is to be not very smooth sailing. In post-Ambedkar Era, a reflection on the problem in itself has become baffling. The false certificates and passing off for SCs in onething. Every other low caste not necessarily 'untouchable' are pressurizing the government to include their group in the Schedule. Inter-caste and intra-caste, sub-caste differences among SCs are exploited both by Caste-Hindus and SC politicians and others.

The net outcome is reservation has become another form of exploitative system based on caste. It is like having the cake and eating it too. One has to constantly declare his SC position to avail any privileges. Therefore, the abolition of untouchability and the need to produce caste certificate seems to be strange bed fellows. Neither the practice of untouchability nor their conditions could be substantially improved.

In the essays that follow I have tried to show from empirical data how all these measures are beset with fresh problems and thwarting the efforts putforth by government to bring them into the mainstream.

With the exit of Ambedkar, there is lack of leadership. Political parties which invariably have reserved candidates do not necessarily mean to provide a leader. They meet only constitutional requirement. Very few of them can afford to be vocal and assertive.



The SC leadership crisis in Karnataka, can be reenacted in all the status of Indian Union. The sequences and nuances only point out that political reservation and SC problems do not necessarily go together. They can be divorced, indeed they are. The general socio-political atmosphere changed with corruption—nepotism, casteism jealousy and illwill are indeed the conditions of 'Anomie' currently plaguing Indian Society. Old values and norms sneak in and disrupt possible changes and creating an egalitarian society. With elections and all kinds of caste organizations caste has emerged much stronger and an institution par excellence in recent decades.

All the constitutional measures provided for the betterment of SC have touched only the upper crust. They are the ones who are exploiting the ignorance and innocence and innocence of village bound fellow brethern. There is a built in snag in the policy of reservation, once you are in the scheduled one would strive to continue there by any means. A vast majority of scheduled Caste people thinly spread over the innumerable villages in the country have yet to know and avail the facilities. So far only forward groups among them have grabbed all the available opportunities. There is no way of preventing it. For they are now emerging as the organizers, leaders and perhaps spokesman of these helpless masses. In this there is neither ideology nor service motive but self-advancement seems to be the motivating factor. The ability to capture opportunities made oneself more secure. In this the sufferers are village bound SCs. The wrath of the village community falls on them. They are facing worst kind of privation. They are the victims of policies and programmes meant for their betterment.

These are recurring problems from most parts of the sub-continent. Atrocities on SCs are on the increase and will further intensify Democratic Governments which are given to all kinds of interests and pressures can hardly wield an iron hand to put them down ruthlessly. But something has to be done to extricate the Indian society from this malady. Human efforts are necessary to solve inhuman problems. In the paper on social stratification, traditional values and

modern forces in contemporary India I have tried to show the interplay between the modern forces generated through a galaxy of legislative measures, democratic institutions enmeshed in traditional values. In certain areas of social life the traditional values have reemerged with full vigour so that the social stratification has become much more sharp and complex.

The traditional caste system and the practice of untouchability have undergone a qualitative change. What was a private institution and remained somewhat subdued today in post-independence India has emerged as a public institution. Caste has become much more stronger and caste consciousness widespread. The plethora of caste and communal organizations which have emerged in recent decades is a case in point. General elections have roused caste consciousness to a considerable extent. Traditionally dominant castes have also emerged as powerful political pressure groups. Linguistic reorganization of the States, whatever, be its merit, have indeed provided fresh opportunities for a few numerically preponderant land-owning middle-range castes to emerge all the more powerful. The Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka, Reddies and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh the Mudaliars in Tamilnadu, the Nairs, Syrian christians and Ezahvas in Kerala, the Thakurs, Bhumiars and the jats are only a few caste in point.

This suggests the emergence of new forces who are in every way interested to dominate and thus subdue, sabotage all the attempts made by the government to ameliorate the conditions of SCs. It is not so much the Brahmins, but the traditional values upheld by Brahmanical Hinduism have surged forward and are eagerly adopted by the middle range sudra caste groups. It is these groups which are thwarting and cannot stomach the onward march of the traditionally survival groups—the Indian Scheduled Castes, the problems of inequality are so deeprooted in the Hindu Indian Society, the notions of social justice have no meaning. Caste Stratification is itself based on inequality the graded hierarchy which is the hallmark of caste system seem to be endless. Not only people are divided into innumerable castes and sub-



caste, by birth itself people enjoy ascribed high or low status in relation to one another. The Brahmins are still placed at the top of the socio-religious hierarchy. They enjoy the highest ritual status. But among Brahmins again there is a graded hierarchy.

The Scheduled Castes are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy and have very low social status with little or no ritual status. Even among SCs there are innumerable castes and sub-castes which enjoy differential status.

Thus inequality rooted in organic attributes has come to dominate other spheres of life in India. Traditional occupations barring agriculture, carried pure-impure attributes priesthood, reading, writing—modern white collar jobs all carry better status. In contrast butchery, toddy tapping, dealing in leather and hides, scavenging are polluting occupations which carry low status. The high status occupations naturally were/are more economically rewarding than the low status ones. Those who enjoyed economic security naturally wielded power and influence. Thus, political dominance of the upper castes and subservience of the lower castes is built into the caste system.

In this kind of all pervasive inequality marked by the absence of sense of social justice further mystified by ideas of karma, dharma, punarjanma, superimposition of developmental activities channelized through democratic institutions could hardly produce the desired results. Some of the developmental schemes introduced for the benefit of SCs snags rational thinking. Traditionally low status occupations are being introduced under developmental programmes meant for SCs. This only perpetuates low status.

In recent years there is considerable economic diversification, but very few SCs are able to avail them. Industrialization has not helped to absorb the SCs and STs is substantiated by several empirical studies. In this way the rich have become richer the poor still poorer. The gulf between the rich and the poor has grown wider and unbridgeable, those below the poverty line who cannot afford two square meals a

day generally belong to the lower and lowest caste groups. So development for whom and what becomes significant when viewed particularly in the light of community development programmes.

In the essay on caste and conversion movement an attempt is made to review historically the impact of several social reform and religious movements and their impact on the caste system. One is astonished at the resiliency both caste system and Hinduism have enjoyed. With every attempt to decry caste rigidity and call a halt to man's inhumanity to fellowman as exemplified in the practice of untouchability, caste system has reached firmly and Hinduism has tried and successfully subsumed all and sundry, sometimes conflicting and often contradictory values as well.

Starting with Buddhism, Jainism, Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Kabir Panth, Sikhism, Veerasaivism—and a host of other indigenous reformist and revolutionary movements cannot be said to have succeeded in subduing the caste rigidities.

Islam and Christianity which came to India from outside, professing brotherhood of mankind kindled hopes of equality and justice. They both attracted Indians specially low caste discrimination and aggression for generations. But these two faiths also are not able to scale beyond caste reference.

It is not so much religious factor as the caste factor that dominates. When people embrace new faith, it does not necessarily mean they gave up caste roots old beliefs and practices. Pre-conversion caste status is very much alive and carried along with religious conversion. This makes religious conversion a non-sense. Most of these movements unfortunately have added a few more new castes and sub-castes to the already existing ones. Given this fact religious conversion can hardly combat against casteism in India. Neo-Buddhists, the followers of Ambedkar should have a close look at the history of conversion movements and their social impact. Conversion does not effect miracles if the socio-economic realities are stagnant.



The case for Indian untouchables and the Weaker Sections, the Scheduled Castes in India highlight the miserable plight of these people for no fault of theirs. A society permeated by ascribed status and values can hardly recognize achievement by personal efforts. The achievement oriented values and traditions do not find much favour. Caste snobaries are so deep rooted, they, often come to foreunder very strange circumstances. The touchable, untouchable signify both physical and social distance. The impact of karma, dharma and punarjanma have left an indelible mark and continue to do so. With nearly 1/5 of India's population under the grip of traditional values and beliefs, how can India modernize? What moral authority we have to condemn racial segregation in South Africa or elsewhere? It is true in India, theoretically the government is not a party to suppression of Scheduled Caste. According to constitution, the government is an agent of social reform, harbinger of equality and social justice by introducing several welfare measures and providing constitutional provisions for their uplift. In contrast the racist regime in South Africa is the suppressor.

What is happening to several government measures meant for the uplift of SCs in India. Has the practice of untouchability disappeared? Have we a system of evaluating the impact of the schemes? Are not atrocities on SCs increased by leaps and bounds all over the country, especially in the country-side in recent years? What action is being contemplated to stem these? Doesn't the government propaganda in itself arouses the enmity between caste Hindus and SCs? These and similar questions comes to one's mind again and again.

The position of rural SCs has become much too vulnerable and very few Indian intellectuals, especially sociologists have come out with any views on these growing atrocities. Scheduled Castes, majority of whom profess Hinduism but are illtreated, oppressed by fellow Hindu upper castes. Government alone cannot manage. The role of the voluntary organizations and the social education of caste Hindus is important.

The growing awareness among SC educated and politically active few are by and large a phenomena of towns and cities.



Initially the reaction against these activists also be negative. For there is already a large scale infiltration of vested interests into these ranks, who may eventually succeed in scuttling the emergence of effective leadership among SCs. This has already been demonstrated in the case of Dalith Panthers of Maharashtra not to speak of the Republican Party.

Panchayati Raj and weaker sections again highlight the vulnerability of the SCs caught in rural setting. From the available empirical data it has been shown, there is no surplus land for distribution among the landless agricultural labourers who are mostly SCs. When the SCs are at the mercy of upper caste for food and shelter, political representation on panchayats hardly makes any difference. A few upper castes have traditionally dominated politically in villages. These are the one's who continue to dominate under changed circumstances as well with landed property, political backing and influence. Today they command the lower castes much more effectively than previously. The sympathy and little understanding which marked the co-existence of touchables and untouchables of yester years today has resulted in creating misunderstanding, Jealousy and hatred. So the cleavages have widened and ramified sub-caste differences among SCs are successfully exploited at all levels in political arena. Ambedkar perhaps thought that armed with political reservation the SCs would grow from strength to strength. What is happening in the name of democracy given to several pressures cross pressures and interests, one wonders as to what will happen if political reservation is withdrawn ! Is there need for different strategies to tackle the problems effectively ?

The two papers on Ambedkar tries to examine the views held by Ambedkar regarding the social order. At the turn of the 20th century when the development of the discipline of Anthropology and sociology was still nascent and often indulged in searching for the origin of institutions, beliefs and practice. Ambedkar tried to apply the same technique to study the caste system. As a student at Columbia University, New York, he prepared a seminar paper. Viewed from the now available empirical data and the general advancement of the

disciplines themselves, in some respect Ambedkar is right and far sighted in other respects he is caught in the general mess of searching for origins, which is hardly scientific. Some of Ambedkar's views thus do not stand testimony to growing knowledge. Just as Marxism has taken varied new forms in its onward global march Ambedkar also falls short of scientific approach and temperament. This is neither the folly of Ambedkar nor can I resist from pointing to loopholes. This is the essence of growing knowledge.

The Scheduled Caste classes and masses in post Ambedkar Era show the trends of developing cleavages. While the reservation policy in itself is not to be blamed the way it is implemented, how it is exploited by the forward sections among SCs and others, while millions in rural India are still grouping in the dark is the central theme. The continuation of reservation in the present form and speed will not redeem the millions. It has become a weapon of exploitation in the hands of the ruthless and vested interests. A more meaningful policy has to be pursued and made time bound. Otherwise it kills initiative on all fronts. The gulf amongst different sections of Scheduled Castes instead of being reduced will be widened. India perhaps can never get rid of the scourge of untouchability now practiced in several forms and more sharply structured than previously.

The paper on the crisis of SC leadership and Karnataka politics was presented at the International Sociological Conference held at Toronto, Canada during 1975. In fact a re-reading of the paper while preparing for publication was so refreshing, and one could mentally recapitulate the whole gamut of events that followed one after another. Some of the events are sensational in that they were scandalous and appear to be calculated attempts at mud slinging and character assassination. This is not the point I would emphasize in the crisis situation.

Assertive and vocal SC leadership is not tolerated. If they want to survive in the system, they have to assume secondary tertiary if not the low position and should play their roles



(accordingly) in similar manner. The interplay of events and the cut-throat competition among different Scheduled Caste, sub-castes comes to the fore. If anything over the years the intra-caste and inter-caste rivalry has multiplied. Whichever be the political party exception being the RPI founded by Ambedkar which is in shambles the top leadership is invariably in shambles the hands of upper caste leaders and SC political representation serves to meet the constitutional requirement. Beyond this they are neither encouraged to be original nor tolerated if vocal. The net result is there has been a severing of the possible connection between political reservation and problems of SCs. The aspiring SC candidates from a reserve constituency by and large gets elected on the basis of votes caste by general public and do not necessarily depend upon SC votes. So he is naturally drawn towards other's problems than SC problems in particular given this the political reservation is self-defeating in its purpose of developing real leadership among SCs. This is further exploited by the cleaner upper caste politicians and intelligentsia the press do not lag behind either. In their eagerness to enjoy position and privileges that political reservation holds forth, the meek, subservient 'yes men' are preferred by the successive governments and political parties. This drama is repeated endless number of times in all the States all over the country. This leaves one to ponder whether political reservation can deliver goods as Ambedkar thought of while making the provisions. He was anxious about the development of leadership and fondly hoped that reservation would help to achieve this. This has not happened so far. About half a dozen families in each State have been enjoying the privilege successfully. Even the second line of leadership is not in sight. The way Babu Jagjivan Ram dominated and clinged to position is a well known case in point.

A study of the SC MPs of the third Parliament was undertaken in 1960s. Barring the paper included in the present book, the data remains awaiting analysis. However, I would hasten to add that the data has not become outdated in spite of changes that have come about. I hope to bring out the full

length study in near future. A limit of two changes to reserve constituency candidate would provide opportunity for other candidates hence leaders who infuse some initiative perhaps continued discrimination and atrocities on SCs in near future could possibly involve SC politicians as victims of widespread 'politics of violence' which is raging in the country.

## 2

### SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, TRADITIONAL VALUES AND MODERN FORCES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

All over the world and in almost every society certain forms of human groupings obtain. Broadly speaking these groupings may be based on class or caste system. There are a few societies where the extremes of division or stratification based on class and caste are nearly absent. These equalitarian societies are represented by a few tribes in Africa and elsewhere.

On the basis of economic and political factors also societies can be stratified as capitalistic, socialistic, democratic, dictatorial and totalitarian. Politico-economic structures necessarily cut across the social divisions basic to particular societies. Likewise even religious factors can form the basis of stratification as for instance the theocratic society as opposed to secular society. Political and religious forces buttress one another insofar as the political system recognises a particular religion as State religion. Judaism and Islam, for instance, are the official religions of Israel and Pakistan respectively.

However, the variant economic, political and religious factors could be eventually fitted into two basic types of social stratification that obtains nearly universally. In this chapter I



shall discuss social stratification relating to caste system in India. Caste system has been discussed time and again through centuries both inside and outside India. People drawn from different walks of life have often analysed its merits or demerits and utility or otherwise of the system.

I do not intend to enter into a discussion of the system merely to applaud its achievements or merits. I will show how the modern economic, political and other forces are incompatible with the caste stratification. Hence enormous resistance to changes are visible. This feature has led many western scholars to characterize Indian society as tradition-oriented. Max Weber has described Indian society as tradition-bound which at no time encouraged the growth and spread of rationalism, notably in its economic and political structures.

Despite Weber and other scholars description of a tradition-bound society, India has been striving to turn the current of traditionalism in the direction of modernism ever since she attained independence in 1947. To what extent this has or has not been possible, and in case it has not what are the factors that obstruct the forces of modernism and why is a question to be faced. How these obstructionist forces can be overcome and whether they could be overcome at all are important matters for discussion and analysis.

Below I set out to explain the basis of traditional social stratifications. In doing this, as already referred to I will be essentially analysing the characteristics and attributes of the caste system. I will not hazard a discussion on the origin of caste system. It is not quite certain at what point in the history of India caste system as now understood emerged. It is said that during the Vedic period there was no caste system of stratification but there existed a somewhat 'loose' class system which is identified as '*varna*' order wherein qualitative attributes were crucial for a person to belong to one or the other *varna*.

The emergence of caste system with its many rigidities is attributed to the writings of *Manu*. The time of *Manudharma-shastra* is again somewhat hazy, but nevertheless these writings

testify the crystallization of caste from the open class to a closed system. The four-fold *varna* division; Brahmana Kshatriya, Vyshya and Shudra still remained the broad categories of stratification. But the classification was systematized and many 'do's' and 'don'ts' with regard to secular behaviour and relationships were laid down. Birth became the basis of one's status in society. Accordingly, occupation, food, ritual status, choice of mate, social and physical distance between different castes come to be well defined. Anyone transgressing these rules became outcaste. It is probably these 'outcastes' who were later on reduced to the status of untouchables, or the *Panchamas*, to constitute the fifth *varna*,

A Brahmin alone was well versed in the vedas and other sacred literature. He was a scholar, teacher and priest. He enjoyed the highest status and was ritually 'pure' and he initiated the *Kshatriyas* and *Vyshyas* into the twice-born fold by becoming their teacher and priest and investing them with the sacred thread. The *Kshatriyas* symbolised physical prowess. Constituted a military and ruling class defending the sanctity of Brahmins. Along with military duties of defence of the State and the social order.

The *Vyshyas* were associated with business and trading. They provided the society with means of subsistence.

The *Shudras* constituted a class of manual workers engaged in cultivation and carrying out the orders of the three upper caste groups. The Brahmin's services were not readily available to them. Their status was low and they were denied the right of reading the Vedas or any other sacred literature.

The fifth *varna* consisting of several outcastes must have been considered very low and lived in the periphery of the system. Their position naturally became deplorable as time went by.

The three upper castes, *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya* and *Vyshya* were vegetarians and teetotallers, although variant forms of behaviour are particularly attributed to *Kshatriyas* at different times in the history of India. They occupied a ritual hierarchy



with the *Brahmin* at the top, and the social and spatial distance between them was not very marked when compared with the *shudras* and untouchables in relation to the Twice-born. Between the *shudras* and *panchamas*, the *shudras* ranked much higher and they did not suffer from the stigma of untouchability. Both these groups ate meat and drank alcohol, while the untouchables took to eating even beef and beef carrion. Hence they suffered the worst kind of degradation. They were a constant source of pollution to upper castes. Their sight, proximity and touch were abhorred by caste Hindus.

Each caste group became a self-perpetuating unit by adhering to endogamous system of marriage. While upper caste men could occasionally have the privilege of marrying women from lower castes, the progeny of such unions being of the same status as that of the women. Women of upper castes could not marry out, while men of lower castes were similarly restrained. If per chance such unions occurred, it was illegal and the issues were classed as *chandalas*.

The above account of caste system is too neat a picture broadly akin *varna* system but with definite trends for rigid crystallization. In fact, today, within each *varna*. There are innumerable castes and sub-castes carrying nearly all the attributes of caste system with graded ritual status based on inequality. Among *Brahmins* for instances there are hundreds of castes and sub-castes which exhibit features of caste system and differentiation among themselves. The Kashmiri, Bengali and Kunkani *Brahmins* who eat meat and fish are a category by themselves.

Thus traditional Indian society based on caste system upheld graded inequality, the *Brahmins* occupying the top rank in the caste hierarchy and the untouchables being put at the bottom. The remaining caste-groups constitute the middle range castes. Occupations, rules of dietetics and general interpersonal relationships among caste-groups are of graded inequality where the upper castes belong to the privileged section while the lower castes constitute the under-privileged. Naturally power relations in the scheme is one of superordination and subordination among different castes. Although there

is a good deal of inter-dependence among caste groups in the sphere of economic and ritual activities, these roles are also graded according to caste status. A particular economic activity or ritual service such as a priest or leather worker was and continues as more a reflection of one's caste status. A combination of both these for instance is found in Barber's and Washerman's services, which account for their low position in society.

While each caste was and still is associated with a traditional occupation, all manual work involving 'pollution' as leather work, removal of dead cattle, was the lot of the lower castes. The lower castes discharging these and similar duties lived at the mercy and on the economic doles made by the upper castes. From the beginning the economic dependence of these groups on the upper castes is proverbial. Economic interests had an overriding effect and also led to political subordination, so that today they are at the bottom of the economic stair-case.

Majority of the untouchables today are classed and describe themselves as Hindus. Caste system is central to Hinduism, and untouchability is part and parcel of Hinduism the philosophy of *Karma* and transmigration of soul both of them wrongly understood and wrongly applied denied the individual the freedom to attempt betterment. On the contrary *Dharma* consisted in conforming to *Karma*, supposed to be the consequence of one's past actions.

Popular Hinduism is at variance with the upanishadic religion. Hinduism, apart from being pantheistic, also demarcates one caste deity from another caste deity although they may have common name. The gods and goddesses worshipped by upper castes enjoy higher status. While very low status is accorded to deities worshipped by lower castes and untouchables.

One of the central principles of social stratification in India is the ritual status and notions of 'ritual purity and pollution'. These notions pervade everyday life and colour all human relationships. There is very little that is left without being



covered by them. There are clean and unclean occupations. Unclean occupations cause pollution and lower the social status of people following them. Even food and drink have differential ritual status and could be hierarchically graded. All these notions are rooted in Hindu beliefs and practices. Thus religious descrimination provides the real hurdle for any kind of modernization. Can secularism and democracy initiate changes in the traditions? To what extent advancement of science and technology and their progressive impact can change the traditional outlook? Can increasing urbanization and industrialization make the traditional social order untenable? These and similar questions are of utmost importance to the Government especially for purposes of greater national integration and abolition of social inequalities. They are equally vital points for consideration by the social scientists.

To take science and technology as factors which could usher in far reaching changes, one has to treat it with a degree of mental reservation. The knowledge and use of science and technology know no caste, class and race barriers. Yet these can be articulated in the cultural idiom peculiar to a group or society.

All the scientific instruments, gadgets and mechnery for a Hindu are the manifestation of a higher power. They become ritual objects and are worshipped. Given this attitude the impact of science and technology is not far reaching. In fact it is construed in traditional ways. Human sacrifices are still offered in dam and bridge constructions. Electric lights are ceremonially saluted upon being switched on at dusk. Traditionally light and fire are associated with *Agni*. The modern version of light, although a scientific device, still constitute an object of reverence. Such instances can be multiplied indefinitely.

Science and Technology has not been able to break through traditional values to any greater extent. Likewise urbanization and industrialization have only limited application. These processes have brought about greater mobility of population, consequently food and drink taboos, spatial and social distance



restrictions are relaxed. But industrialization and urbanization also bring forth many ugly social evils in their wake. However, the process of change is so slow in India, social changes initiated by these factors are insignificant. In post-independent India, Industries are progressively afflicted with social evils natural to the structure. Recruitment processes often ignore qualifications and expertise. Caste and communal considerations and other extraneous factors have assumed greather significance. Regional and communal differences among industrial employees and riots at Ranchi and elsewhere points to the fact how industrialization has not been able to evolve a rational process as yet to break through traditional values.

Urbanization has brought about secondary group relationships. Yet the effective social relationships obtain only between members of the same caste or sub-caste. Residential pattern in many Indian towns show caste affiliations. It is extremely difficult for a person of low caste, though economically sound, to rent a house in an area occupied by upper castes. Old caste prejudices persist no matter whether one is illiterate or highly educated prejudicated. Even in urban centres low castes are found to live in compact area away from upper castes.

Urbanization and industrialization together should help to bring about a socio-economic revolution and lead the country in the direction of modernization. Industrialization and urbanization in the west as is well known changed the face of society. Feudalistic type of society based on personal loyalties crumbled, caught between the joint forces. But the bulk of Indians, nearly 75 per cent living in villages dependent for subsistence on agriculture, are truly tradition-bound. Caught by democratic process and adult franchise, traditional values have found a fresh favourable milieu. The ready identity of an individual is, of course, dependent on caste membership.

It is worthwhile examining how the processes of democracy are operating in India, since India became a sovereign democratic republic wedded to secularism in 1950. Theoretically

we have constitutional guarantees which provide equal opportunity for development of all irrespective of caste, creed and sex differences. The weaker sections, the socially economically politically and educationally backward people, the scheduled castes and tribes receive a differential protective treatment for some decades to enable them to come on a par with the advanced sections of the Indian population.

The legislation, however, has not touched the religious aspects. Presumably religion was thought of as a significant factor in private life rather than in public life. Unfortunately the caste system and Hinduism are inextricably interwoven. It is difficult to analyse religious freedom and at the same time endorse that all temples be thrown open to untouchables. 'Temple entry' did figure for long during the life time of Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar. But as pointed out earlier even the deities worshipped by low castes are reduced to low status. Their entry into caste Hindu temples would amount to desecration. In the light of this knowledge, constitutional provisions enabling the Scheduled Castes to enter caste Hindu temples and worship is a contradiction to the existing beliefs and practices. Attempts by Scheduled Castes to avail these provisions are met with stiff opposition and are prevented. Even to this day entry of Viswanath Temple at Benaras and Puskhar in Rajasthan has been denied to even Members of Parliament.

Conversion from Scheduled Castes to other religious faiths like Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism as is well known has not helped to elevate the status of converts and frequently they too are discriminated against and illtreated.

In independent India a certain quota of jobs and seats in educational institutions, are reserved for the benefit of Scheduled Castes. The least said about it the better. The economic incentives provided for upliftment hardly reach them and that in time. In a world of caste preferential treatment and protective policy. Even the legislative measures have roused the animosity of caste Hindus. The claim to equality of opportunity for similar jobs remain largely theoretical.



In actual practice Scheduled Castes are denied the opportunity. Among the educated people, caste and communal feelings are found to be surprisingly strong and are being practised with the same rigour.

The political reservation given at the centre and State levels serves a limited purpose. Often it is an intriguing situation in which the Scheduled Caste MLA's, MPs and Ministers are entrenched and made to function. They enjoy greater privileges than their rural brethren, yet their position is by no means enviable. Here also it amounts to meeting constitutional requirements by getting Scheduled Caste men elected as members. But their role is unlike that of other members and they are less equal. Being vocal and original are not assets but great liabilities and positively dangerous. Scheduled Caste politicians thrive only so long as they remain 'mere yes men' to party leaders and other members who dominate. The politics of presidential selection and thereafter highlight this. Congress factions paid lip sympathy to serve the cause of Harijans during the Gandhi centenary year by disagreeing to one of them the highest office.

Similarly the introduction of Community Development and Panchayati Raj institutions to develop rural leadership as part of the processes of decentralization of power have proved in many places the bane of weaker sections and untouchables. Even under decentralization, 'traditional leadership' has succeeded to power by virtue of its wealth, influence, following and high caste status. Above all it thrives on the strength of dependence of the economically and socially backward castes. The Scheduled Caste members of the village panchayat meet the constitutional requirement but do not and cannot play the role of leaders. For, how can castes which are traditionally subordinate economically, politically, juridically and ritually inferior to the upper castes assume such roles? By and large the majority of untouchables in rural areas are still dependents only. Abject poverty, appalling illiteracy and general ignorance set the limit.

Village leadership especially as Chairman or *Sarpanch* it

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a prerogative of the upper castes. Merely being a panchayat member makes no difference. A local untouchable cannot dream of dominating politically or act on a par with other members of the panchayat. For this is a contradiction to daily experience when the untouchable needs necessarily to depend upon the mercies of caste Hindus.

This brief analysis finally brings me to dwell on the theme as to how traditional values are resurgent, while modernizing forces of democracy and technology as they appear now, in their initial stages have not been able to cope with domineering old values. Wherever a balance is struck between the modern and traditional forces traditionalism has remained a dominant partner. The modern elements introduced thus far have adjusted very well with the traditional forces. Where there is a conflict, the former naturally has succumbed, as it has not acquired enough resisting power.

A span of two decades is too meagre in the historical sense to expect overwhelming changes from a society wedded to traditionalism to transform itself along modern lines. Whether it will, in due course, is difficult to predict. Hinduism has subsumed variant forms of religious systems survived their attack and included them with it finally. Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity and Islam to mention a few revolutionary and reformist movements, all have failed miserably to rise above the basic caste stratification. How can caste and religion be isolated? Whether caste system can at all be destroyed and how it can be accomplished are important considerations.

Caste and communal sentiments have prevailed over broader issues and issues of general national interest. The caste politics which is so rampant in all Indian States has revitalized the old traditional values. Dominant middle range castes like the Reddis and Kammas in Andhra, Lingayats and Okkaligas in Karnataka, are exploiting the situation for personal and group benefit. How could this vicious circle be broken up? These dominant castes are often included in the list of backward classes, so that the really backward and



untouchable sections do not get opportunities to see the light of the day. One wonders whether linguistic States have not directly or indirectly contributed to the emergence of politically powerful groups which are to any programme of betterment of the weaker sections.

The incompatibility between the traditional and modern forces has in recent years lead to lot of tension and conflict. Whenever low caste groups and untouchables have tried to invoke constitutional guarantees they have met with the solid opposition from caste Hindus. Yet changes are taking place although piecemeal. As a matter of fact, untouchables who have tried to assert their rights have been illtreated, beaten, burnt to death. Arson and loot and holding the untouchables to ransom is on the increase. Walking in caste Hindu streets with sandals on or untouchables riding bicycles have been assulted by caste Hindus, as such behaviour amounts to transgressing traditional values differentiating the 'high' and the 'low' castes. The lot of the untouchables, and the practice of untouchability is more rampant in villages than in towns and cities. It is more rigidly practised by women than men. People following traditional occupations, such as scavenging, sweeping, tanning are more susceptible to be discriminated and treated badly than those who have changed their occupation. Yet even change of occupation or dissociation with one's traditional occupation does not seem to redeem a person from the stigma of untouchability. Formal education has brought about certain changes but has not eradicated the practice. Although the educated employed are economically better, they still suffer discrimination and humiliation at the hands of their caste Hindu colleagues and neighbours.

Constitutional remedies have remained largely on paper. A large chunk of Indian population, more than 15 per cent coming under one or the other category remains a religious minority, backward class and untouchables. 'Change of heart' as preached by Mahatma Gandhi remains a farce. Gandhi won in the dialogue with Ambedkar and declared untouchables as Hindus. But the atonement for the curse of untouchability



on the part of caste Hindus is not yet in sight. Public apathy official indifference, ignorance of the weaker sections and multitude of other factors have proved a stumbling block.

Of late political scientists have started thinking of caste-groups as political pressure-groups. It would have been alright if there were to be no snobberies of high and low castes and consequent inequalities. How can the high and low be equated? Whether the latter can successfully compete with the farmer? I am afraid that the expectation of a radical change in this matter is somewhat premature and hasty. Caste has a strang in the social and political life of the people. Theoretically democracy confers equal opportunities and equality of status. But they do not obtain in practice. In the absence of this to construe caste-groups as pressure groups would certainly amount to advocating communalism and reversion to traditionalism fostering and flourishing on 'social inequality' and not secularism.

These are not merely teething problems of a young democracy. Over a period of time they can become stumbling blocks in the way of ushering in any kind of change and effect improvement. How these could be brought about is really an uphill task particularly in the light of the emergence of many militant Hindu political organizations. Government policy could be accelerated not only through officials but through the personal interest that each politician develops in these problems and a willingness to tackle them whenever and wherever it is possible. The political leaders getting elected against reserved seats should truly concentrate their attention on these problems at least pertaining to their constituencies and thus appraise the legislative and executive bodies of the nature of these problems and possible solutions.

The Scheduled Caste educated employed persons, are in a fix insofar as it is only the government which employs them, and as government servants they cannot take a lead or be vocal. The few educated among them are withdrawing from

the masses as well as the politicians. They are increasingly alienated, isolated from their people and live in a world of their own. Their economic position permits this. However, this group can serve some useful purpose, by way of voluntary efforts to help educate people imbue them ideas of self-help and dispel their ignorance.

The Christian missionaries are usually blamed for their activities of converting these unfortunate people into Christian faith. This apart, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge the missionary services in medical and educational fields. How many voluntary Hindu organizations have taken to this kind of work? It is high time voluntary organizations take the queue from foreign missionaries and emulate the zeal for social service. The social education of caste Hindus is equally urgent and important for the solution of the problems.

The many religious organizations *mutts* and temples could take the lead. Much of the landed wealth could be converted into collective farms by the Government and given to these groups under supervision and technical assistance. Hereditary priesthood should be replaced by those trained in theology. This should go a long way in breaking the religious barriers and discrimination of touchable and untouchable.

Increasing urbanization, industrialization, education, economic betterment, political awakening among the scheduled castes and like groups will bring about changes. But the process is essentially slow. Unless adequate measures are forthcoming from government side and these are matched by voluntary efforts on the part of these and other groups, tradition remains strong. Traditions and modernity can co-exist and they need not be anti-thetical or incompatible. This presupposes the increasing hold which modern forces should gain over traditional forces and not being insulated or immune to changes. In fact no society can remain isolated and immune to changes. In order to quicken the processes, not by revolution but by peaceful methods, perhaps the Govern-

ment should tackle it on a war footing by propaganda and multipronged attack on old prejudices and irrational practices. *Sati* is abolished, women have gained rights of coparcenary, devadasi system, child marriage, slavery, human and animal sacrifices are all controlled. A determined and persistent effort willingly carried out should after all pay some dividends.



### 3

## THE PROBLEMS OF INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN RELATION TO DEVELOPMENT

The contemporary Indian Society with a democratic constitution ideally stands for equality, freedom and justice to all the citizens. These constitutional guarantees however, are not translated into action and therefore, there is inequality in practice. A democratic country tagged on to old social structure and sets of values which are wedded to graded hierarchy can hardly strike a balance between the political and social structure and bring about social equality. Ideally democracy stands for many-sided development of all. In the Indian case, there are some formidable problems. There is need for social justice to achieve development.

At present, the Indian Society in general and its constituent part in Karnataka is characterized by social inequality. Social inequality is rooted in the Indian Caste System which has acquired religious sanctity. The extreme case of inequality is exemplified by the existence of a group of people classed as untouchables. Untouchability, however, is constitutionally abolished and they have been recipients of "protective treatment." Precisely because of this I will deal with the problems of this very group of people in this chapter. They constitute

roughly 1/5 of the country's and States' population. Constitutional guarantees are not translated into action in most of the cases. The practice of untouchability still continues and so social inequality persists. This adversely affects all developmental plans and programmes. Indeed development of any kind gets bogged down and suffers repercussions wherever and whenever inequality of one or the other kind is more pronounced.

I will present the causes of inequality and absence of social justice to highlight the extent to which developmental programmes are hindered or otherwise affected. As already indicated the Indian Society is characterized by graded inequality. The caste structure of social stratification which obtains in the country is based and it tacitly supports a graded hierarchy wherein the Brahmins occupy the top and the untouchables the bottom. In between these two, there are a number of castes whose ranking cannot be done with certainty because of regional variations.

The traditional *varna* division of Hindu Society is too neat a picture. Unfortunately the scheme of classification into Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vyshya and Sudra cannot be applied without reservations. In fact it suffers from great many limitations. For instance, the Panchamas—the fifth *varna*—synonymous with present day Untouchables, variously called depressed classes, Harijans do not find a place in the original scheme. To this extent, the scheme no longer represent reality. Also all the castes and subcastes which obtain in the country can hardly be fitted into the fourfold scheme. The *varna* classification might have been quite useful at one time. Since it does not serve the present purpose of study and the complex social structure that obtains in the country, I will not discuss here the relevance or otherwise of *varna* system.

Social inequality as idealized through caste system are primarily rooted in the ritual status consequent to the birth of an individual in a particular group. Caste membership is ascriptive, while economic and political status are largely acquired. Yet historically it can be demonstrated that favour-

able economic and political conditions coupled with not too low a social status—*i.e.*, if they are above the 'pollution-barrier' have helped to alter the overall social status of individuals and groups. Every group aspiring for higher status even Nadars and Jatavs have claimed Kshatriya status with the support of Brahmin priests. While those competing for equal status with Brahmins have either failed as is the case with Acharis-Smiths—or succeeded under special circumstances as it is with the Lingayats.

The peculiarity and the complexity in caste system is its deep involvement in a set of religious values. In fact every secular activity traditionally is conceived and articulated not so much on the basis of individual or group achievement but by what is inherent on the basis of birth. Economic activities, political and religious participation, food, dress and modes of behaviour were and still are pre-determined accordingly. Below I will deal with this aspect in brief to show how super-imposition of democratic ideals of equality, freedom and so forth on an old structure which has withstood the ravages of time and events and successfully upheld inequality between man and man, cannot simply give in for the new slogan which is lacking in creating a new set of values to replace the old value systems.

The Brahmins and untouchables could be clearly demarcated on the basis of the privileges one has had and their total absence in the case of another. The 'do's' and 'don't's' were and still are articulated in terms of 'dharma' and 'karma'. It was the dharma of the Brahmin to read, write, teach and perform priestly duties in religious ceremonies. He enjoyed the highest ritual status and followed such occupations which were considered 'pure'. Likewise it was the dharma of the untouchable to engage himself in low and polluting occupations such as scavenging, removing the dead cattle, preparing leather articles and so forth. An untouchable was thus a constant source of ritual pollution for an upper caste Hindu. His touch, sight and proximity were meticulously avoided.

While Dharma consisted in carrying out duties enjoined in



religious texts as ordained by god, Karma was the consequence of one's past activities. It was one's karma to be born as an untouchable, and born as an untouchable he should conform to the dharma of the group. Thus, the dharma of a Brahmin, non-Brahmin and an untouchable were different and could not be intermixed or changed over. Dharma therefore, considered in carrying out duties as "moral obligations" marked by a sense of superordination and subordination. These notions of dharma and karma, ritual purity and pollution still weigh very heavily in the minds of millions of Indians both high and low can be gathered from the available empirical studies notably village studies.

The maintenance of ritual status implied keeping both social and spatial distance and heaping many privations and hardships on the lower caste-groups by the upper castes. The lower castes lived and continue to live in utter subordination ritually, economically as well as politically. Professing a common religion does not put all the Hindus on par with one another. There are superior Hindus and inferior Hindus based on the fact of birth into a particular caste. The kind and extent of social inequality that has historically marked the Indian Society may be said to have arrested the development of the country and her people in a number of ways. The privileges and privations being the yardstick of social status have created a wide gulf between different castes and the untouchables are being put at the farthest end.

The democratic constitution which ideally stands for social justice, equality and freedom has not yet made its impact on the masses of people in the last 25 years. This is obvious from the fact that the vast majority of Indians living in villages have barely experienced the implications of democracy or its administration of developmental and welfare schemes.

True a sense of political equality has brought about certain changes in political sphere. Political processes cannot operate in a vacuum. The new political forces operating in a traditional structure can hardly bring about radical changes required to establish an egalitarian society and social justice.

Just as economic factors are not the only decisive factors in determining social status in a class society although Marx believed them to be the crux of class struggle. Likewise political democracy in an otherwise undemocratic country wedded to traditional values and institutions cannot easily change over and make a bid for development.

Only untouchability is abolished and its practice is constitutionally punishable. The institution which really gave rise to untouchability and nourished it ; the caste system is left intact. Caste will not disappear with the legal abolition of untouchability as believed by Mahatma Gandhi. The belief that there was no untouchability to begin with and so only if that is abolished, the rest of Hindu social structure will be alright to cherish new ideals of democracy is a wishful thinking. Untouchability has come to stay as part and parcel of Hindu caste system for thousands of years and cannot be washed away without tackling the institutional base and value system.

It seems to be tacitly believed that political democracy, modern education, urbanization, industrialization and occupational mobility coupled with spatial mobility will bring about changes in caste. While this is partly true, yet the caste consciousness and feelings surprisingly have found a favourable milieu. Caste and communal parties on all India basis are increasing and every group is out to reap maximum benefits by organizing itself as a pressure group. Also communal political parties and communal representation instead of fostering ideas of social equality and bridging the gap have unwittingly ended in creating and widening the gulf.

Traditionally, the upper castes have not only enjoyed superior ritual status, but even economic and political power have been concentrated in their hands. Modern education has been taken advantage of by these groups. So the intellectual the elite and the official class is constituted of these very people. It is interesting to note how the political parties of all India stature are founded and continue to be dominated by the upper castes. Hardly any political party worth the name can be attributed to the credit of lower castes. The Scheduled



caste federation and the Republican Party of India founded by Ambedkar and his followers could not thrive for long. While D.M.K. and Akalidal are facing crisis.

While within Hinduism, the dominant feature is caste inequality, there is religious inequality between different religious in the country. The ugly communal riots which erupt and continue in independent India are a case in point. The Muslims, Christians, the Parsees, the Sikhs and Buddhists are only a few religious minorities which are at a disadvantage when compared with Hindus. Although Hinduism and religious tolerance are made out to be synonymous by Hindu leaders, in practice a good deal of violence, tension, disparity and discrimination persists. Freedom to profess one's own religion and imposing dominant Hindu ideals exists side by side. The role of the Heads of secular state and their intensive religiousity centred around Hindu temples and ceremonies further strengthens it.

Social justice cannot be established in the absence of economic, political and religious equality. Distinction between the high and low is further strengthened on the basis of caste, occupation, food, social and spatial distance, access to public places and temples and a variety of other causes generated by modern factors of education, employment opportunities and general mobility of the people.

Political democracy including rights to vote, contest elections including reservation of seats in different political bodies of the state cannot be said to have improved the position of the Scheduled Castes and Tribes any significantly. Majority of the Scheduled Castes are scattered in the thousands of villages in the State. Scheduled Castes themselves are divided, graded, and treated differently by caste Hindus, Untouchables, outcastes, Depressed classes, Harijans and Scheduled Castes are not one caste but a conglomerate of castes and subcastes with differential status. The most vulnerable and elusive concept seems to be the Scheduled caste as it does not refer to any group in particular. Its only connotation is that any group that finds a place in the schedule. Untouchables and Scheduled



castes are at variance and technically are neither coterminous nor interchangeable. Many Untouchable caste groups do not find a place in the schedule. Small wonder how often touchable caste can pass off for scheduled castes merely for the benefits that accrue by being included in the list.

The introduction of Panchayat raj institutions is meant to create initiative and develop leadership from the grass-roots level. In the village panchayats women and Scheduled castes are compulsorily represented. Political representation at the village level is an anomaly in both the cases. In the day-to-day living Scheduled Castes are nearly totally dependent on landowning caste groups. The Scheduled Castes can exercise their newly acquired political rights only at the cost of livelihood and threats of lockout and social ostracism. A Scheduled Caste village panchayat Chairman is yet to be heard of.

The Scheduled Castes as well as other low clean castes including village functionaries therefore constitute economically the poorest thus politically remaining subordinate to the rich with landed property who generally belong to upper castes.

A number of empirical studies carried out in different parts of the state during the last 15-20 years confirm this. T.S. Epstein in her study of two Mandya villages highlights how Okkaligas dominate in both the villages. In Wangala Okkaligas constitute 66.5 per cent of the population and owns 88.9 per cent of land. The next largest group A.K. and Vodda untouchables constitute 18.1 per cent and own 6.7 per cent of land. In Dalena Okkaligas constitute nearly 80 per cent of the village population and own 92.2 per cent of land. While A.K. Untouchables constitute 9.8 per cent of population own just 2.2 per cent of land. Thus Okkaligas own nearly all the land and have job opportunities outside the village. They are economically sound, politically powerful and socially superior. The untouchables as agricultural labourers with hardly any job opportunity outside the villages are nearly totally dependent on Okkaligas.

The Okkaligas thus are in a dominant position to pressurise

and suppress any aspirations to better themselves on the part of the lower castes. The 'drama incident' which Epstein discusses is a very significant and shows how even ideologically the superior and inferior relationships are construed and articulated. The Untouchables staging the drama after the harvesting season to entertain the Okkaliga and other caste Hindu patrons were required to squat on the stage and not sit on chairs while playing the role of King and Prime Minister. During the 1950's when Untouchables toyed with the idea of changing from the traditional pattern and to sit on the chairs while the caste Hindu audience sat on the floor, the irate villagers not only boycotted the show, but arranged for an alternative social evening of poetry reading under the adult literacy programmes. When it rained, the caste Hindus attributed it to supernatural retribution and finally declared a lockout thus compelling the untouchables to admit their guilt of transgression and pay a fine.

According to oral information, what little land the Scheduled castes owned during 1950's in fact has been lost to the rich and ambitious Okkaliga farmers by 1960's. So that they have become still poorer and easily vulnerable to machinations of upper castes. Their representation in the village panchayats is nominal. The helplessness of the police officials and Untouchable political leaders in fighting against the practice of untouchability is vividly portrayed.

The findings from another comparative study of two villages in Mandya and Mysore Districts in the late 1960's equally confirm that upper caste occupying distinctively advantageous positions are dominating economically, politically, educationally and in every way. The location and housing conditions themselves indicate the social degradation and inequality of the lower castes. The Untouchable hutments away in a corner removed from the main village are a poor comparison to substantial houses and bungalows owned by Okkaligas in Belagola. Okkaligas with a population of 54.2 per cent own a total of 80.3 per cent dry and 85 per cent of wet land. The Scheduled caste A.K. Madiga and Korama with a population of 16 per cent owns 10 per cent dry and 6.4 per cent wet land.



The remaining 14 castes own 9.7 per cent dry and 8.3 per cent of wet land. In the case of the last group other job opportunities are available and their social status is not very low. They are not discriminated as regards the use of public taps, entry into temples and tea shops.

Hardly about 18 persons among Scheduled castes are literate while 365 literates and among them 27 college educated persons can be found among Okkaligas. There is no representation to Scheduled castes in the cooperative society, while political representation on the village panchayat board has hardly made them politically conscious of their rights. In fact the Scheduled caste panchayat members are pawns in the hands of powerful faction leaders among Okkaligas.

The other village, Dhanagalli is in Mysore District. Untouchable A.K.'s constitute 50.4 per cent but own 42.0 per cent of land. While Lingayats and Parivaras totally 45.3 per cent of population own 55.3 per cent land. The Lingayats who are numerically less and constitute 20.6 per cent controls the village panchayat, cooperatives and play a decisive role. The numerically preponderant A.K. Untouchables should have headed the village panchayat. But from the existing situations it cannot be realised in the near future.

In both the villages Untouchables are still required to carry out their traditional role of removing the dead cattle from the houses of the caste Hindu patrons. Refusal to do this, it became clear in informal discussions with caste Hindu informants would not only lead to rupture of ritual and economic ties but also social ostracism of the Untouchables. As agricultural labourers, they have little or nothing to fall back and they would be simply humbled to accept the traditional roles however low and degrading for there are no viable alternatives in the face of threats even for subsistence.

The empirical findings from Kshetra, a village in Bellary District more or less fall in line with the above two studies.

There is lack of education, so a good deal of ignorance on the part of low castes. In fact the political rights which they



periodically exercise are determined for them by a handful of powerful upper caste middlemen having a network of ties with people and they skilfully exploit to keep the bulk of people under perpetual obligation. Further the locally dominant upper castes impose a number of social and religious disabilities which have come down traditionally. Economic dependence of the lower caste people make them remain in subordination. Mere political democracy cannot establish social justice. Legal enactments do not reach vast majority of rural people. Further when known to people there is dearth of enforcement on the part of authorities. Illiteracy, ignorance, economic and political dependence and low status make it impossible for these people to claim equality with upper caste groups.

How can social equality and justice be achieved so that development activities are less beset with hurdles and failures? Obviously the first thing that strikes one as the most crucial means to free the vast majority of people from dependence and utter subordination is the economic betterment. There are several ways of bringing about this. Since bulk of Scheduled castes live in villages and eke out their living as agricultural casual labourers, wages can be standardized without infringing the occupational interdependence. There is need for rationalization of occupations on scientific lines particularly to relieve the lower caste people forced by circumstances to stick to occupations which carry low status and degrade them as "pollution" bearers. Scavenging, removal and skinning of dead animals, leather curing and leather work are only a few to mention.

If traditional occupations still continue and are meaningful with reference to the bulk of Indians one has only to recall that barring cultivation, even the so called traditional occupations earmarked for a group were and are invariably supplemented by other occupations. Not all Brahmins and Jangamas for instance, are priests. Not all potters, barbers, blacksmiths, carpenters and washermen, could make a comfortable living by following exclusively their traditional occupations. Further even if traditional occupations are continued by upper castes,

these are high status occupations. By no stretch of imagination it can be said that the demarcating line of 'pure', 'impure', 'high', 'low' status has vanished. At best it is little blurred. To this extent the low castes, so long as they are following low and degrading occupations, old values and connotations persist and their social status cannot be improved.

Industrialization and urbanization can largely account for both spatial, social and occupational mobility. A word of caution, that the social problems which come in the wake of industrialization and urbanization such as housing, transport, communication, recreation and so forth should be well planned and difficulties obviated from the beginning itself.

Free and compulsory education for all up to the end of secondary school level and then phased educational programmes on the basis of aptitude should be provided. The hostel or residential facilities for students should undergo radical change. All private and community hostels should be converted into general hostels and admission in these being open to all irrespective of caste, religion and economic status. Changes in the education structure can speed up development.

Lack of social justice may be construed as the concomitant of the concentration of masses of people in rural parts engaged in traditional occupations. Change in economic activities preferably trade, business, cultivation—will lead to diversification of occupations. The maldistribution of wealth and disparity in income weighs very heavily against the poorer sections and lower castes. Measures to correct this should be promulgated by the government. Also enforcement of legislative enactments and follow up measures should be devised.

"Protective discrimination" in the name of Scheduled castes, Tribes, backward classes and Religious Minorities leads to perpetuation of *status quo*. This is contrary to democratic principle of equality, but at the moment an evil-necessity. These constitutional guarantees should be time-bound and operated with rigour on war-footing. Also groups suppressed and oppressed for thousands of years cannot come up on their own without government support. While the government is bound



by democratic principles of equality and freedom, it should start its operations perhaps from grass-roots level, by providing compulsory free education to all, levelling economic disparities, nationalizing all temple lands and releasing it to the needy, throwing open public places to all and similar measures to speed up developmental processes. Caste should be legally abolished when long term changes can be expected. Abolition of Untouchability and continuance of caste system is an anathema. For in the known history of the country they have always buttressed one another. Initially it might amount to abolition on 'paper' only. But still it should be done with long term objectives to establish a casteless society.

A whole set of new ideas and values should be created to cover every aspect of Indian life. In this the educational institutions and religious organizations can play a leading role by emphasising scientific and secular values. This should be supported by deliberate legislative measures backed and implemented by government machinery.

Social usages and customs die-hard. But with the new generation being brought up in a different set up, in the long run will help to foster and establish ideals of social justice and equality. The newly emergent political-aristocrats with bourgeois ideals can hardly uphold real social equality and justice. There is need for political radicalism if not revolution.

The changes which so far have taken place and are taking place in Indian society do suggest that these ills cannot remain permanently. If majority of the people overtly and covertly are subjected to one or the other kind of injustice and suffer degradation, the country as a whole will suffer a set back particularly as the world relations are marked by competition. Social conditions should be prepared and made conducive to political democracy. Whether social justice can be brought about by deliberate planning, voluntary efforts or coercive measures, once there is awakening among people along these lines onward march cannot be arrested for too long.



## CASTE AND CONVERSION MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Caste system is one of the types of social stratification found almost exclusively in India. This is a system which has existed over several centuries in the country and it may be taken as a fundamental unit of social organization.

Caste is ascriptive and one gets membership mostly by birth. It has certain other important attributes. The notions of ritual purity and pollution govern the behaviour of people. There are caste-based occupations specially those which carry high prestige and status and others which carry low status with social stigma. Social interactions in terms of commensal and connubial relationships, members of the particular sub-caste alone are entitled. So caste and sometimes sub-caste endogamy is the rule. Differential social relations mark the entire organization. Hierarchical relationship of superior and inferior, hence superordination and subordination obtains in actual practice.

The Vedic division of social order is said to be based on four varnas *viz.*, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra. Varna order unlike caste system was a loose kind of an organi-

zation, where membership was acquired on the basis of qualities pertaining to a varna.

Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra did have occupational attributes like priesthood and learning, marshall valour and protecting the country. The Vysyas shouldered the responsibility of providing provisions and trading, while Sudras remained humble servants of the three upper varnas. There is no reference to the fifth, or panchama-varna, which has come to signify the untouchable groups. Even the occupational attributes of the four varnas seem to be fluid and the boundaries of each varna remained open so as to allow others who fitted into it with those attributes. It was not a fixed or rigid social order, although some of the caste attributes were already present in their rudimentary form in *chaturvarna* organization.

Today varna has outlived its utility except that it provides a broad model when local and regional groups could be fitted into an all India category. The post-Vedic period, especially upanishadic, puranic times are said to have provided the fertile grounds for the rigid classification of social groups. Birth became the sole criterion to reckon membership of social groups. Occupational attributes continued and came to be observed more rigidly. In the writings of law givers, especially Manu, those who transgressed the rules of behaviour and action pertaining to different groups came to constitute out-castes.

From this time onwards presumably it is these outcastes who were lumped together as untouchables and hence it is justifiable to assume that the outcastes constitute the forefathers of later-day untouchables. In the post-Vedic history of the Indian caste system there is a definite trend for more and more proliferation. Additional distinct characteristic features based not only on occupations that are followed but even the rules of dietetics were evolved and became quite elaborate. The distinction between vegetarian, non-vegetarian was not a rigid one during Vedic period. Likewise consumption of alcohol, and even dealing in it came to be a definite attribute of low caste status.

Fission rather than fusion seems to have played a predominant role throughout. Groups began to demarcate their social boundaries from one another. In all these exercises, the race for higher status continued unabated. Only those who conformed to certain values and traits were able to attain higher status in the caste hierarchy. Others were necessarily pushed below.

If the *chaturvarna* pyramid had the largest base occupied by Sudras, the tip of the pyramid had essentially a sharp and pointed contrast for its thinness. The Kshatriyas and the Vysyas who came immediately below the Brahmins, in that order, enjoyed high status and were entitled for some kind and amount of education as determined by the Brahmins. The largest majority of Indian population, the Sudras were denied any access to learn and acquire any kind of knowledge. So also the women of all the four varnas were in fact reduced to the status of Sudra only. A most liberal estimate would reveal that hardly twenty per cent constituted the three upper strata, while nearly eighty per cent have invariably been dubbed as Sudras perhaps inclusive of the *panchama varna*.

Brahmins have necessarily constituted a negligible minority group of 5-6 per cent of the population. As a minority group it has endeavoured throughout history to keep its boundaries fixed and closed to others. As a class of literati they cornered all knowledge and this made them superior and put them in an advantageous position over all others throughout the period. Added to this, the Brahmins enjoyed highest ritual purity perhaps unparalleled in the history of mankind. The physical and social boundaries were safeguarded by elaborate practices of ritual pollution relating to time, place and persons. Ritual pollution in relation to certain categories of persons became ascriptive resulting in unbridgeable physical and social gaps.

The 'untouchable', 'unapproachable' and the 'unseeable' are not imaginary categories, though for all practical purposes, the untouchable group seems to have subsumed the latter two and anyway the number of people reduced to the status of untouchables were so enormous, it were their problems which



have haunted the conscious souls over the centuries and many experiments were tried to reduce their misery by appealing to exhausted metaphysical principles or expounding ways and means of elevating human souls.

Beliefs in *karma* and *punarjanma*, cycles of rebirth based on the merits of one's action during life time never left scope for lower castes to improve their chances of better life. Leave alone the services of the Brahmin priest, his sight or even unwittingly listening to the recitations of the sacred texts were not only forbidden but meted out with severe punishment. The concern for the 'hereafter' than the 'here' made the office of the priesthood so crucial that everybody remained subservient and the awe inspiring power of the Brahmin to curse literally sealed the fate of all castes below the Brahmins and more specially the out-castes or untouchables.

The powerful and superior position held by the Brahmins and the privileges stemming there from have seldom been questioned and when questioned, rarely have succeeded against the Brahmin. Polytheism coupled with the absence of feelings of brotherhood of mankind has rendered Hinduism and Hindus to constitute disparate groups with no single centralized religious authority even as the entire super structure revolves around the unquestionable Brahmanical superiority. The customs, traditions, values and practices which emanated from such a system necessarily were diversified which meant an indication of their differential social status. The fact remained that those which had Brahmanical origins were held aloft and glorified and such of the non-Brahmans who came close to Brahmanical values could indeed attempt to claim higher social status from among their co-caste fellows and immediate neighbours in the caste hierarchy. Vegetarianism, teetotalism, ban on widow-remarriage are only a few cases in point. However, by and large the untouchable groups which tried this mechanism could not succeed in raising their social status for obvious reasons.

The tyranny of the Brahmanical values and caste rigidities from time to time have led to protest and reform movements.

Many of these have been articulated in religious idioms and they have tried to bring about social transformation and change by recruiting people to the new faith from several low caste Hindu and untouchable groups. In this chapter I am inclined to treat all these attempts as essentially based on the philosophy of conversion. Both indigenous as well as those faiths which came from outside recruited people from within the country and tried to make a dent in the caste system.

Conversion as a phenomenon leading to change of faith is thus a very old practice in the Indian sub-continent. Perhaps this is not the same as the denominational differences among Christians and other religions. Buddhism may be accredited as the earliest attempt to combat against not so much caste rigidities and the practice of untouchability, but mainly concerned with the salvation of individual souls. Overwhelmed by the theory of Karma, transmigration of souls and priestcraft, partly as a reformist attempt and partly to explore ways and means of escaping from constant rebirth, Gautama Buddha, after prolonged periods of meditation and withdrawing himself into solitude was able to show the path of *Nirvana* through enlightenment. *Nirvana* unlike Hindu *Mukti* was to be attained without undergoing the pangs of rebirth. The role of the priest was eliminated. Even God as a supreme being was outside the purview of Buddhist philosophy. It was a religion based on reason and compassion. But differential attitude to men and women, the latter as much inferior in the religious as well as other ways remained an undercurrent for ages.

Buddha came from a royal background and Buddhism backed by ruling powers particularly by the Maurya Dynasty and during Ashoka's rule reached its pinnacle both within and outside India. Sri Lanka, South East Asian countries, Burma, Japan and China soon came under the impact of Buddhist religion. So widespread, it developed secondary features. Buddha became a legendary figure and not a mortal human being and eventually was elevated to the place of divine being himself. Also structural differences led to the



formation of Hinayana and Mahayana divisions among the Buddhist followers.

Back home in India, Buddhism flourished for a while under royal patronage. It was thought of as a competitor to Brahmanical Hinduism and looked as though the entire sub-continent would come under its spell. But long before this could happen, the tables were reversed. For under the Gupta rulers, Hinduism was restored to its original glory. The Golden Age of Hinduism as is usually described by the historians saw the retreat of Buddhism in the land of its birth.

Whether Buddhism came in direct conflict with Brahmanism or it grew weaker with the waning of support from rulers or the fresh attempts of revival of Hinduism attracted the masses largely remains a speculation. However, in the book "who were untouchables. . . ." late Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has put forth a proposition as to how majority of untouchables embraced Buddhism and agreed to do the watch and ward duty of the villages by staying at the periphery of the villages. The villager in turn provided food and shelter for the services rendered. In the continuous skirmishes which followed between the predatory Bandit groups and the watchmen the groups were further broken up to constitute 'broken men' of 'floating groups' who were unattached to any. The fact they ate beef, beef carrion, which came their way further rendered their position vulnerable and they came to be distinguished and discriminated.

How much of this account given by Ambedkar stands historical tests is one thing. But the fact so far it has not been refuted suggests that historians have not taken it seriously. It is time that historians and others who seriously think of the issue took it up in earnest to explore the truth or otherwise of this proposition of Ambedkar. As for Ambedkar, it was not just a preposition but a fact beyond doubt. The roots of his learning towards Buddhism and the conviction with which he endorsed Buddhist principles and finally embraced Buddhism at the fag end of his life along



with a vast number of followers cannot be treated lightly or as a fad.

Yet all said and done, even a person like Ambedkar had to reckon with the religious susceptibilities of people as against abstract metaphysical ideas. This suggests the stronghold religion has on mankind throughout.

Along side Buddhism, Jainism as another form of religion was floated by yet another prince. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism never posed any threat to Hinduism and its dominance. Conversion to Jainism admittedly seem to have been selective from the beginning. It never aspired to become a proselytizing faith. So outside India we have very little of the spread of Jainism, except where Jain traders have migrated. Even within India, it remained a faith with small group of followers who never contended or took up cudgels against caste rigidity and untouchability.

Like Buddhism, Jainism was also preoccupied with the liberation of the soul. Karma and rebirth, the role of the Brahmin priests in keeping others in the dark seem to be the main moving factors to motivate Mahaveera and his followers to explore new avenues. Jainism surpassed Buddhism in making compassion as a cordial virtue. Non-injury to living beings was an ethical precept accepted both by Buddhism and Jainism. But Jainism carried the principle of Ahimsa or non-violence too far that orthodox Jains cover their mouth and nose lest small insects get in while breathing and get killed and also generally take their food before sunset.

From this earliest attempts which give an insight into the nature of Indian society its religion, caste stratification, one could gather a wealth of information, precisely because Indian society has literacy traditions albeit a near total Brahmanical property from ancient times. One could argue that precisely because knowledge was hoarded among minority Brahmins—withheld from majority groups—they can be said to have been the pace setters in every possible way.

Customs, traditions and values were not only initiated by

Brahmins, but were made to govern the lives of 'all' Hindu's, even the Sudras and Harijans who were in every way considered inferior to the twice-born Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vysyas. As a minority group the Brahmins interpreted the Hindu laws ; of male superiority, marriage sanctity, family and caste traditions. Brahmins took quick notice of any new demands, be it in religious-caste field, education-secularization, political leadership, social reform or change. That is how many indigenous social movements were led by Brahmins.

Arya Samaj in Punjab and Brahmo Samaj movement in Bengal, Dayananda Saraswathi and his followers, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tagore and others were able to spearhead these two movements, which are still lingering on but never became counter forces to Hinduism. Reform of Hinduism in select ways was attempted by both. Both recruited people from among different castes and tried to bring about changes.

Education of women was common to both these movements. Sati, widow remarriage received special attention of Brahmo Samajists as these were quite common among upper castes. Back to Vedas, and revival of Vedic Hinduism was the message of Saraswathi. Brahmo Samaj on the other hand was willing to share commonly held religious values from both within and outside the country. The Suddhi movement introduced by the Arya Samaj to reclaim converts to Hindu fold so that converts from different caste background, especially low castes, could become socially acceptable and on par with upper caste converts is proof enough to indicate the limitations. In fact Suddhi or purification activity though it appears to be a revolutionary step, simultaneously it is an equally controversial attempt. The rank and file has no common social platform and the social status of the reclaimed remains as problematic as ever.

The adherents—in a way converts—of Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj did not republic Hinduism. Caste differences and customary practices came under reform, while the former looked back, the latter tried to modernize and secularise. They did not deal directly with the plight or problems of the untouchables. These remained essentially in the periphery in the scheme of things.



Kabir panth, Raidasis, Satnamis, all emphasize devotion and truth. The caste discrimination, as well as the practice of untouchability do not find much favour. In fact, the founders as well as followers of Raidasis and Satnamis belong to untouchable groups. Reform of habits, like giving up meat eating and alcoholic drinks to improve their social status seem to be central to them.

The fact that devotion and salvation dominate most of the indigenous attempts to bring about reformation within Hinduism. In North India Kabir panth gave inspiration to many smaller movements including Sikhism. It is said 'Kabir was born of virgin Brahmin widow' brought up by Muslim weaver family. The best of both Hinduism and Islam were picked up discarding the bad aspects. Belief in one god, unity of men, truth, love and compassion were the qualities emphasized by Kabir. Kabir panth which attracted large number of followers ended up in mystifying Kabir leading to distortions, group differences, so that here also Brahmins are given great importance in the Panth and Panth-mathas as against the Sudra and other low-caste adherents.

Sikhism which is concentrated in Punjab seem to be one of the most successful religious movement which again combined in itself the best of Hinduism and Islam based on devotion, salvation, deliverance from the chain of death and rebirth to all mankind irrespective of caste, creed, and sex. Thus Sikhism like other indigenous movements repudiated social differentiation based on caste and upheld the ideal of equality.

People from upper castes like Khatris, Jats, Artisans and Craftsmen converted to Sikhism. People from untouchable caste groups also embraced the new faith to escape from traditional degradation. It can be seen as a lesson of Indian history, its religion and caste, all being continuous and contagious to the core. Sikhism was not able to rise above the narrow loyalties of converts from several castes. The lot of the untouchable Sikhs is more or less the same as that of their Hindu brethren.

Most of the north Indian movements in modern times were geared to combine the best of both Hinduism and Islam,



Sikhism and Kabir panth are cases in point. While Brahmo Samaj was even willing to include the exemplary features of Christianity, the Arya Samaj movement in a sense was a violent reaction to Christian and Islamic conversions in India. Simultaneously it attempts to rectify the defects of rigidity within Hinduism by giving a call to go back to Vedas and revive Vedic Hinduism which did not have many of the snobberies of caste with low and high status, also the status of women was much higher. However, it was not a movement which devoted to elevate the untouchables and how many and how often untouchables embraced and professed Arya Samaj doctrines remains a speculation. Arya Samaj has not been able to bring about social equality among its adherents. Differential social status and rank persists.

Of the many other regional and local movements emanating from untouchable ranks, the Raidasis, the Satnamis tried to reform themselves on a model of Brahmanical values. Though they lamented the caste rigidity and untouchability, they could not bring about any radical changes. They succeeded in breaking away as a section from their fellow chamars.

The Varcaris of Maharashtra, based on devotion, is again a sectarian organization which tried to ignore minute caste distinction.

The S. N. D. P. (Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana) movement was again based on reforms and devotion within the broad framework of Hinduism, unity of mankind, oneness of god, equality are of repeated precepts. The Ezhavas, the toddy tappers in Kerala occupied very low social position and were grouped and treated as unapproachables. Narayana Guru tried to evolve a more humanitarian philosophy and practice to overcome the discrimination. It has by and large been confined to particular caste and has not widened to include the problems of untouchable castes in general. Socio-economic and political factors are so much interwoven, Ezhavas have managed to attain a considerable degree of social mobility and there was very little conversion involved in this process. Caste based as it has close resemblance to similar attempts elsewhere, the Nadars of Tamilnadu for instance.

Before, I deal with Islam and Christianity, the religions which came from outside the country and today constitute two influential minority groups, I would deal with Veerasaivism, a saivite sectarian movement of Karnataka. The movement is put down to 12th century AD and to the active role played by Basava, the exponent of its doctrines. As in other movements, in Veerasaivism also, Basava a saivite Brahmin by birth rebelled against the Vedic rituals of blood sacrifices, degradation of women, caste distinctions, especially the low castes. He attacked the Brahmanical values of ritual purity and pollution. Preached equality and introduced the notion of 'dignity of labour' especially manual labour.

Basava and his followers worked again within the broad framework of Hinduism. Shiva—one of the Hindu Trinity—was given an exalted place. Jangamas replaced the Brahmin priests. The movement had considerable appeal and impact. Large number of people drawn from different social strata, particularly low castes embraced Veerasaivism. The royal patronage and political positions which Basava enjoyed under Bijjala, the Jain king was more than helpful in spreading the faith.

To-day Veerasaivas or Lingayats occupy first place in terms of preponderant numbers in Karnataka. There are several occupational groups which occupy distinct place in the hierarchy. For though Basava was upright in condemning caste differences, untouchability and so forth, the various groups which converted to Veerasaivism succeeded in retaining occupational and previous caste status consciousness for all social intercourse.

There are Lingayat agriculturists, Businessmen, Oilmen, Tailor, Potter, Barber, Washermen, to mention only a few occupational sub-castes. These groups are as crystallized as Hindu caste organization. Lingayats practice untouchability with reference to barber, in so far as other sub-castes do not accept cooked food from them.

Marriage and to some extent interdining is confined mostly to members of the same sub-caste. Veerasaivism which rebelled



against Brahmanical religious ideas and tried to replace them by more human and universal principles in due course itself succumbed to the Hindu caste snobberies. There are castes and sub-castes and hierarchial ranking, some superior and others inferior among the rank and file of Lingayats. Thanks to the efforts of Basava and his followers, that instead of containing the contagion of caste and untouchability it lead to their proliferation. The irony of fate, Veerasaiva Mutts, innumerable as they are, serve to increase the narrow loyalties and sub-caste differences. The revolutionary reformist anti-Brahmanical movement as it started once, to-day has come a full circle and there is no gainsaying of the fact, Veerasaivism is writ larger Hinduism despite its professed anti-Brahmanical attitudes.

The history of Indian caste system as one could glean is replete with movements and counter movements to do and undo certain aspects which were considered from time to time as a hindrance to social life and contrary to natural law and sense of justice. Conversion literally means change of faith. In this sense conversion is not directly applicable or more particularly meaningful. Caste is not religion, but only a kind of social stratification based on certain attributes.

In the Indian context caste has always been more than religion because where Hinduism begins all caste ends or *vice-versa* cannot be easily distinguished. The rules of caste are rules of religion, one buttresses the other and both have sustained one another over centuries. It is futile to talk of Hinduism minus caste system. In this sense, it becomes reasonably clear why many of the indigenous movements, both rebellious and reformist, directed their attention on caste organization rather than Hindu religious susceptibilities in favour of emergent religious order of different kinds such as Buddhism and Jainism. A vast majority of them, however, operated within the framework of Hindu religion so that it was easy for them to get a following. The Marxist saying is 'religion is an opiate' to people. If this is so, India gets the pride of place in the world.



It is only by appealing to the religious susceptibilities of the followers, leaders of certain sectarian movements can achieve success. Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Sikhism and even Veera-saivism adopted this strategy and converted people to their view point and enrolled them as members of the sect. Their main invention was to bring about certain changes in the caste system, to replace an old set of values by a new set. But values die hard. Even the changed values gradually got transformed in the new system and became akin to old values in Hinduism. For instance, vegetarianism and teetotalism are cases in point. All the indigenous movements eagerly extolled the merits of such values.

In spite of condemning Brahmanical values, on many fronts, the new movements tacitly accepted the superiority of some of these values. Hence the challenges posed by them were not foreign to the 'native' religion. There were many common points and masses of people could easily grasp them. This I am inclined to view as a continuous process of fission and fusion from within Hinduism and caste system. Aspiring people broke away from the parent groups and formed a new group with slightly different set of identity but within the framework of Hindu ideology. Each attempt to reform and change caste system produced chain reaction so that Hinduism became more and more elastic to include within itself anti-thetical, contradictory forces.

Today in Hinduism there is no single, strong, well organized religious authority. It is an amorphous mass. In fact, one could argue that it has always been so. Hinduism has always distinguished but include within its scheme the extremes of ritual purity and pollution. Similarly it has always distinguished rather discriminated but included within its fold the herbivorous teetotaler and the carnivorous alcoholic essentially compartmentalized into superior and inferior status.

While the various indigenous movements showed, adopted or developed a good deal in common with Hinduism in general even as they tried to break away from the tradition, let me now turn to analyse the impact of two faiths which also cons-

titute world religions, that came into India from outside; in a sense they both followed and preceded the respective foreign rulers and have been living as rival religions to Hinduism.

Islam came to India with the Muslim invaders, who plundered the country, demolished her temples, mutilated the images of her gods and goddesses. The predatory desert religion with its religious ideologies of monotheism and brotherhood of mankind had no soft corner for other religions. Earlier it had waged hundred years of war "the 'cross' *versus* the 'crescent'" against christianity. Its cries of 'Jehad' and its 'uppression of women as evidenced by modern Iran, overran different parts of India for several decades.

From looting the booty, gradually they established their kingdoms and empire and ruled over the Hindus. The Mughal rule in India is both a period of consolidation of Islamic political power as well as Muslim religion. Unlike the indigenous reform movements, the Muslims were not interested in appearing the spirit of casteism and Hinduism. Their intentions were quite clear.

By overt and covert methods, they made Hindus to embrace Islam. This becomes very clear by the time Mughal rulers consolidated the empire. Many Hindu rulers—the Rajput families—in North India were subjugated by the Muslim rulers. Marriage relationships were contracted by the Mughals with converted Rajput royal families. Islamization in India did not follow a set pattern. Whenever, and wherever the Muslim invaders overran Hindu kingdoms they generally destroyed the property, temples and otherwise slaughtered people. To avoid being killed people embraced Islam and accepted the overlordship of Muslim rulers in Delhi.

Regional kingdoms and Muslim rulers like Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan of erstwhile Mysore, the Bahamani kingdoms, the Nizam of Hyderabad to mention only a few from South India highlight the amount of depredation and tortures inflicted on the people in general. Violent reaction to Muslim domination can be seen in the rise of Hindu kingdoms of Vijayanagar, rise of Shivaji, the Maratha ruler and so forth.



Here again the lower castes were the first to react favourably to conversion movement as they were the ones who needed improvement in their social status. The philosophy of hatred nursed by Muslims towards non-Muslims and the royal patronage, the propagation of Islam, faith enjoyed coupled with a rigidly stratified Hindu society, helped the spread of Islam throughout the country.

While Arab traders had earliest contacts with the coastal people of Malabar, inter married with them and their progeny today, the Mophlas of Kerala are widespread, the greatest concentration and more enduring Muslim kingdoms appeared only in north India. It is only in these parts forcible conversions occurred in innumerable cases. Even the orthodox Brahmins served in Mughal courts as officers and advisors, often under compelling circumstances.

Islam has many plus points in contrast to Hindu caste system. Discrimination based on ritual purity and pollution is absent. Food restrictions are not many though alcohol and pork are taboo. A strong sense of brotherhood, Muslim *versus* non-Muslim, in any crisis situation will manifest itself easily. The creation of Pakistan is a case in point. Religious authority is strong and more centralized than it is in Hinduism. The status of Muslim woman is much worse off compared to Hindu woman and so on.

There are innumerable occupational groups among Muslims, which does indicate differential status and rank. While inter-dining may be in vogue, inter-marriage among different subdivisions is not frequent. The Sunny, Shia differences and fierce battles which are fought between them for status is common knowledge. The native converts rank much lower to Arab descendants and upper caste converts.

While regional and local variations may occur and Muslim social organization may not be a replica of Hindu social stratification, it is not by any means strange, if caste like structure is found among them. Living amidst the Hindu majority, Muslims in rural India have combined Islamic and



Hindu cultural traits. They also observe untouchability and in many ways they could be fitted into the general caste hierarchy.

Social stratification based on differential status among the Indian Muslims is therefore a natural corollary of both conversion and then being surrounded by Hindus. One has to compare the Indian situation with the middle east and Islamic countries to understand the differences. Islam with its cries of 'Holy war' has somehow provided a hope throughout the world for the oppressed and the suppressed, in Africa, in U.S.A. in more recent years among Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu, that it holds the key to redeem the sufferings inflicted on people in the name of religion.

Islam's ability to fraternise Muslims against non-Muslims is one thing. But its conservatism, religious fanaticism, subjugation of women and the grinding poverty leading to class-mass differences have such deep impact, women who are fighting liberation in other religions would hardly welcome Islam. Conversion to Islam has not brought about equalitarianism among Indian Muslims. It has led to confrontation and division of the country. But those who lead the separatist movement and enjoy the fruits are definitely the elite group and not Muslims drawn from the lower rungs. Social barrier against chances of social mobility in Islam are much less pronounced perhaps.

One more striking phenomenon which provides a testing case in the Indian context is the near absence of Islam among Tribal people. The Tribal people, given to simple subsistence economy have developed equalitarian social structures almost all over the country. It should have been among these that Islam would have found a very ready made bed to spread its ideology. Unfortunately it did not attract the attention of the Tribals, some of whom have changed under the impact of Hinduism, suggests that Islam made predatory efforts amongst people whom it crossed and effected forcible conversion, circumcision and abducting Hindu women, either to include them in the 'zanana' or enslaved them.

It is these mechanisms which Islam adopted to spread itself initially that perhaps has imposed a limited appeal. Only people caught under one or other stresses of exploitation voluntarily choose to convert to Islam. However, impact of Islam on Hinduism and *vice-versa* have been mutual in certain areas, like arts, architecture, music and so forth. While in other areas of life they have functioned as rival groups. In fact Hindu reaction against Islamization is at the foundation of Arya Samaj, Sikhism and similar attempts to provide alternative religious ideologies and systems to Hindus.

Christianity, unlike Islam did not strictly follow the western rulers. Traces of the existence of christians even before the arrival of many of the maritime powers, like the Dutch, French and English are available from different parts of India. Kerala, Goa and other areas testify to this.

Christian theology emphasizes monotheism and upholds in theory fatherhood of god and brotherhood of mankind. The faith which was contained to European continent for a long period made rapid strides with the adventurist explorers, traders, travellers followed by missionaries and rulers. The maritime powers which gave the western countries to take a lead over others, helped in carrying the messages of christianity to different parts of the world. Wherever, the traders and missionaries were followed by the political powers, the foundation for conversion of native people were laid on a more firmer ground.

Christianity has had its origins in a socio-economic milieu which was far from egalitarian. Unlike Islam, the desert religion, in its origin more prone to egalitarianism, christianity flourished in an environment of extremes of socio-economic disparities in Europe. It gave the message of brotherhood of mankind under such uneven conditions. In its outward march, the Christian missionaries emphasized the need for saving the souls of the heathens and prepared the way for the establishment of the kingdom of god on earth.

The strategy adopted by christian missionaries from the



beginning were very different and subtle in contrast to physical force and might be exhibited by Islam.

The Christian church organization itself is a well established hierarchically structured, vested with differential, economic, religious and political authority. It could send its army of missionaries to carry the message of Jesus to different people all over the world. The missionaries lived and worked among the potential converts to christianity. They spread education, rendered medical services and preached the gospel of Christ overtly and covertly cajoling the people to see the superior, humanitarian side of christianity. Love, compassion, appeal and persuasion did pay rich dividends to the work done by Christian missionaries.

In India, christian missionaries found a very fertile ground. The disunity, sharp divisions and cleavages among Hindus coupled with social discontent accumulated over centuries despite many reformist attempts to resolve them and the depredations of Islam, all provided a favourable atmosphere for the spread of christianity. The use of naked force was not at all necessary as persuasion and material benefits provided enough incentives to converts. If the Brahmins and upper castes embraced christianity because of its religious ethics or as an escape from the structural constraints between which they were caught, the low castes and Tribals in India embraced christianity in groups for their own reasons.

The Tribals who were despised by the Hindu neighbours as uncivilized, very backward group and looked down upon, the Christian missionaries provided with essential educational and medical services. They won over their confidence and affection. The sympathetic understanding shown by the Christian missionaries about the day-to-day problems and coming to their rescue and assistance at times of need has had its impact. Many tribal areas in India have come under the impact of Christianity more readily than with Hinduism and Islam.

The Tribal social structure with its egalitarian base did



not find it antithetical to respond favourably to the call of Jesus Christ. In many areas the native religious beliefs and practices of the Tribals continued hand-in-hand with Christianity.

In fact it is a common feature with many of the proselytizing religions that they have to make compromises, adjustments and even adopt themselves to the local environs to thrive. This is what christianity has done in abundance all over the world and even in India. A turn from the Tribal bolt to Hindu India presents a varied picture. Frequently the Christian missionaries worked among the more backward people in most backward areas, particularly villages. The social service philosophy which is built into their techniques was more than an attraction to the depressed and oppressed people. The low caste Hindus particularly the untouchables found in Christian teachings a soothing effect and a means of escaping from the depth of degradation in Hindu fold.

The educational services of the missionaries opened up avenues to these to acquire knowledge, which was totally denied to them, to embark upon finding new avenues of employment and thus achieve a degree of social betterment. The limiting factors of the indigenous socio-economic conditions, however, have played and continue to play a role which is not conducive to christian philosophy.

The Church organization, the different denominations, and foreign missionaries bringing financial aid attracted different castes to christianity in a variety of ways. Those who converted to christianity from upper caste background under favourable economic conditions continued to enjoy the elevated position. Religious conversion did not counteract the caste idiom and behaviour patterns. So all the effective social interrelationships and social intercourse was restricted to like groups and people. Sentiments of co-religionists unfortunately did not cut across the narrow loyalties of pre-conversion caste status and rank.

The church organization and missionaries were unable to check the fissiparous tendencies and social inequalities and

discrimination being carried over to christianity by the converts. The upper caste converts appropriated authority, power and assumed leadership in Church hierarchy for themselves. So that low caste converts to Christianity could not hope to scale these formidable barriers and rise within the religious hierarchy. Not only this but even church services showed differential treatment.

Economically poor, traditionally illiterate and exploited groups can hardly hope to overcome socio-cultural barriers which separate man from man. This is exactly what has happened with christian converts drawn from very low castes. Lured by lofty principles of christianity and other material attractions they changed their faith. But the big brothers who had already occupied strategic positions showed them their places in the scheme and were hardly willing to uplift them. Socio-economic conditions provide a formidable barrier which cannot be broken or resolved by religion is a truism. Religion has a disintegrating effect in day to day life is provided by the Indian christians in ample measure.

The preponderance of Roman Catholicism over other dissident christian denominations has both structural and functional implications. The religious idiom in Catholicism exhibits and shares much in common with Hindu idolatry. The role of the priest as a mediator between man and god, withdrawal and renunciation of active worldly life to obtain the grace of god is also close to the Hindu ideology of 'Karma' and 'Sanyasa'.

The values held commonly by Hinduism and Catholicism are in a very large measure responsible for the overriding effects it has in India. Catholicism could strike compromise with many indigenous caste based idiosyncrasies. The more revolutionary protest movements which rebelled against catholicism in Europe have essentially lagged behind in their competition with catholics.

Christianity did not enter the phase of confrontation with Hinduism. It made compromises and converted people. The church is not in a position to check the increasing demands



made by Scheduled caste christians to constitutional benefits on par with Scheduled castes in India. After all Karl Marx's view and analysis of the primacy of economic poverty, coupled with lack of authority and access to power continue to be true. Change of religion can do very little to alter the situation. Irrespective of religious affiliation, where people have managed to climb up the economic and political ladder, they have come to enjoy a degree of social acceptance and betterment.

The ascriptive nature of caste, and the achievement oriented class status need not be involved in perpetual conflict. In the case of upper castes both have fused. Whether it is Hinduism, Christianity or Islam or other sectarian religions it hardly matters. The bane of social inequality revolves around the basic economic disparity, access to resource and power enhanced by illiteracy. The ascriptive attributes of caste and Hinduism again find a favourable milieu in class strata. They cannot overcome the basic handicaps to reach attainment oriented status. So long as the elements of caste survive, religious conversion means differential opportunities, though a negligible minority can strive to overcome and reap the benefits of social mobility.

Social equality in absolute terms is an elusive phenomenon. In the Indian context it is made more difficult and complicated because of caste stratification and religious values which buttress them. Late Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who took initiative to revive Buddhism in India was one of the luminaries who shined in the horizons though a born untouchable. By the time of his death, personally it could be said, he had overcome the handicaps of untouchable status in many ways. His earlier experiences, however, had left a bitterness against caste-Hindu snobbery. It was not his individual mobility that gave him contentment. The plight of the Indian untouchable groups constantly pricked his heart. He assumed to lead them against Hindu orthodoxy and show the way of deliverance.

Ambedkar avoided both Islam, Christianity and even Sikhism as possible religious substitutes which could improve



the secular status and brighten the spiritual outlook of untouchables. Though he had fundamental differences with Gandhi on matters connected with Hinduism and caste system and was sore that these cannot be easily reformed and much less destroyed, chose Buddhism as a way out.

It would sound naive to suggest that Ambedkar did not know the implications of such religious conversions in the Indian context. For historically every attempt to reform Hinduism or attack on the caste system has produced not much positive results. Group conversions should be strengthened by organization and supporting institutions. While individual conversion based on conviction do not generally produce undesirable repercussions, in the case of group conversions, it is not convictions but religion is used as a devise, perhaps a force to counter other forces. In this sense Buddhism was chosen by Ambedkar for various reasons.

Firstly, it was indigenous and would not be frowned upon by caste Hindus. Then Ambedkar had his pet theory of connecting the origins of untouchability to 'broken men' and these people as professing Buddhism. He found personally the philosophy of Buddhism as most satisfactory, based on rationalism and compassion. Further it would amount to a social service by reviving one of the world's religions which is a living faith albeit outside India. Whether Ambedkar ever contemplated of linking Indian Buddhists with their co-religionists outside and expose their continued plight or seek the active sympathy from outside to amplify and take it before the world community will always remain at best a speculation. He died too soon after the historic conversion ceremony at Nagpur.

In post-Ambedkar years, conversion to Buddhism has not been spectacular. Even those who have embraced Buddhism come from a particular sub-caste among Scheduled castes and mostly in Maharashtra. Elsewhere in India a few Chamars and others have taken to Buddhism. The religious conversion is not matched by required improvement in secular sphere. Their economic conditions and living in the same village social surroundings have not mitigated the problems of discrimination.

The so-called psychological satisfaction and individual images which are forged by the very vocal members among the Buddhist converts, however, have not prevented them from arguing for the extension of constitutional safeguards on par with Hindu untouchables. If religion is private and personal, it can certainly bring psychological satisfaction. But when it is pressed into service publicly, it does acquire a political character or becomes its rival. In the case of Buddhist converts, their life style has not undergone substantial change because of the social surroundings in which they are compelled to live and work. There is a contradiction between the aspirations and actual position. Then a combination of 'change' and 'no-change' techniques to achieve higher status. Change of religion was effected to the traditional drawbacks and discrimination. The demand for extension and continuance of constitutional benefits amounts to self-defeating techniques which can never redeem the group disabilities.

The history of conversion as an alternative to caste disabilities is too long and unfortunately without the much desired positive consequences. Social mobility is not implicit in conversion. One has to achieve by other means. There are certain prerequisites to be followed by conversion to achieve social mobility. Education, change of occupation, preferably white collar occupation, improvement in economic conditions, style of life and above all spatial mobility are the minimum necessary conditions which would lead to change of status in 2-3 generations time. If people convert, remain in the same village, follow the same old occupation and eke out a precarious living with no education or change in life style, it leads them nowhere. The neighbours would stick to *status quo-ante* and not recognize the verbal claims. In a kinship oriented society, urbanization and industrialization has not effected structural changes. Majority of Scheduled castes continue to live scattered in villages, the primordial forces of caste, community, kinship and family are exerting pressure, so that the relationship between the converts and non-converts are cordial and mutual. There is no estrangement because of change of religion.

Uprooting people from some kind of religious susceptibility, despite Marxism seems an impossible task. But religious conversion by itself do not bring about magical transformation in social status. All round changes in secular sphere are bound to bring about new values. The new values should be strengthened to combat against old values, caste rigidity, untouchability and so forth. After all what is there in a religion? It could be a social force and should be used as such and not reduced to the status of handmaid of politics. The barrier between religion and politics is too thin and often they are abused by mankind.



## THE CASE FOR INDIAN UNTOUCHABLES

In this article I propose to analyse some of the causes which are making it very difficult to attain social equality under the existing conditions in India. I will deal mostly with the Indian Untouchables, since they are the group which has been suppressed for centuries, ill-treated by the dominant Hindu majority. The oppressive conditions under which the untouchables lead their lives were marked by the absence of any sense of social equality or justice. Since 1950, equality and justice are constitutionally guaranteed. How these are secured or denied to the untouchables would make a fascinating study. Here I will be able to point out only a few instances, to substantiate the problems of inequality.

The concept of social equality in its wider connotation can have a relative value and not absolute value, under it normally political, economic, religious, racial as well as equality of sexes could be included. Social equality in the full sense of the term stands to convey equality of opportunity in all spheres of life, for instance to seek jobs, and claim justice whenever and wherever it is denied because of artificial barriers of case, creed, race, differences and so forth. In short, it implies an 'egalitarian' society where class as well as caste system of social stratification is not marked if not totally absent. Barring a few

Tribal societies all over the world either represent class structure based on wealth and status or caste structure based on a complex set of factors. In the Indian context the claim to social equality has turned out to be largely fictitious. Although guaranteed in theory, it is found operating relatively ineffectively in most situations.

Historically no society is known to be afflicted with the ills of social inequality to the extent it obtains in India. The essential characteristics of Hindu society is one of graded inequality, based on certain philosophical, theological and social factors. The highest philosophy of the *upanishads*, with a just and benevolent universal god remains all but in theory. But gods and goddesses in Hinduism in fact are graded with distinct occupational and status differentiations more or less on a par with the social stratification that obtains here.

Popular Hinduism is thus based on its religious beliefs and practices which are at variance with the *upanishadic* ones. These religious beliefs pervade everyday life and colour all human relationships and affect secular life to such an extent that it would be futile to talk of Hindu social stratification, namely caste system, minus its religious base. In practice Hinduism and caste system are inextricably intertwined.

It is common knowledge that popular Hinduism, apart from being pantheistic, also demarcates one caste deity from another caste deity although they may have common name. Recent anthropological monographs, elaborate this in terms of 'non-sanskritic' and 'little traditions', which is part and parcel of greater Hinduism. Just as there are exclusive caste deities, there are deities associated with particular tasks. Such as the goddess of fertility, village boundary, cholera, plague and small-pox. The gods and goddesses worshipped by the upper castes enjoy higher status. Similarly very low status is accorded to deities worshipped by untouchables. In the light of this knowledge, constitutional provisions enabling the Scheduled castes to enter caste Hindu temples and offer worship is a contradiction to the existing beliefs and practices.

One of the central principles of social stratification in India is the ritual status and notions of 'ritual purity and pollution'. These notions pervade the life of Indians to such a large extent, that there is very little that is left without being covered by them. For instance, the upper castes are ritually pure and will be polluted by the physical proximity, touch or even by the sight of some lower castes. Spatial distance between members of different castes can be observed in the eponymous residential patterns in the villages.

Likewise there are clean and unclean occupations. Unclean occupations cause pollution and lower the social status of people following them. Even food and drink have differential ritual status, and they could be hierarchically graded. Upper castes generally profess vegetarianism and teetotalism while lower castes eat meat and drink alcohol that carry definite inferior connotation. The lowest position in the hierarchy is accorded to those who eat beef and beef carrion.

Occupations, rules of dietetics and general interpersonal relationships among caste groups are then of graded inequality where the upper castes belong to the privileged section while the lower castes constitute the underprivileged. Naturally power relations in the scheme is one of superordination and subordination among different castes. Although there is a good deal of inter-dependence among caste groups in the sphere of economic and ritual activities, these roles are also graded according to caste status. A particular economic activity or ritual service was and continues as more a reflection of one's caste status. The washerman's and barber's service for instance clearly points to this.

While each caste was and still is associated with a traditional occupation, all manual work involving 'pollution' was the lot of the lower castes. The lower castes discharging these and similar duties lived at the mercy and on the economic doles made by the upper castes. From the beginning the economic subordination of these groups to the upper castes is proverbial. Economic interests had an overriding effect and also lead to



political subordination until at last their position and plight is no better than that of slaves particularly in rural India.

From the beginning caste system proved to be the bane of Indian society. Untouchability is part and parcel of Hindu religion and caste system. The Hindu philosophy of *Karma* and transmigration of soul denied the individual the freedom to attempt betterment. On the contrary *Dharma* consisted in 'conforming to *Karma*' supposed to be the consequence of one's past actions.

The rigidity inherent in caste system and other social evils gave rise to many rebellious and reformist movements in the country time and again. The earliest movements being Buddhism and Jainism, Jainism lingered on as it never became a popular mass movement. Buddhism flourished as a social movement initially affecting both the high and low caste people, yet it disappeared from the land of its birth in the face of Hinduism revivalism. Ambedkar in his eagerness to get rid of the stigma of untouchability brought back Buddhism to India, except now it has changed its complexion, that there are Mahar or Chamar (Untouchable) Buddhists in contemporary India.

None of the rebellious as well as the reformist movements of olden times or recent years did really succeed in removing the inconsistencies and contradictions of the caste system. All these movements not only failed to achieve their declared goal, but as if it were by an irony of fate, they resulted in further proliferation of castes and sub-castes. The Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj movements, Sikhism, Veerasaivism and many other sectarian movements, within Hinduism did not solve the problem and in a way added more problems. It is interesting to note that scheduled caste converts to Sikhism constitute separate groups perpetuating pre-conversion distinctions. If they enjoy any political privileges today, it is only because they are scheduled caste-Sikhs and not otherwise.

The religious faiths which came to India from outside the country, mainly Christianity and Islam did uphold the principle

of social equality in theory and affected mass conversions. Although they succeeded in swelling the number of members in the new faiths especially Islam which eventually led to the partition of India and creation of Pakistan, a Muslim state. By and large these religious movements also did not succeed against the overall impact of Hinduism and the caste sentiments. The new religions were compelled to operate more or less in the caste idiom within the Hindu caste system. One need not search for long to find out how untouchable converts to Christianity have different seats in churches or separate churches, interdine and intermarry among themselves. A caste Hindu Christian, a co-religionist has nothing in common with a fellow Christian coming from scheduled caste background.

Religious discrimination seems to be the real hurdle in the way of removing social inequality. Yet by a strange contradiction most of the scheduled caste people are followers of Hinduism. This being so they would like to live and die as Hindus but not as untouchables. How can this be brought about? Can Hinduism be divorced from caste and graded inequality? What kind of social stratification could be envisaged if certain changes in the caste structure have to be initiated. These and similar questions are of utmost importance to the government especially for purposes of greater national integration, and a point for consideration by the social scientists.

The long drawn out dialogue between Gandhi and Ambedkar regarding the status of untouchables during the Freedom Movement led to the ultimate triumph of Gandhi who asserted that the untouchables are in fact Hindus. Gandhi further declared that he and his fellow Hindus would atone for the curse of untouchability and would strive to restore human dignity and self-respect by treating untouchables as human beings. It is under these circumstances Gandhi designated the untouchables as 'Harijans', meaning the Children of God, the connotation of which, today unfortunately has deteriorated to convey exactly what Gandhi wanted to avoid.

The foresight with which the late Dr. Ambedkar introduced the constitutional safeguards to help the scheduled castes are



commendable. The life-time struggle of Ambedkar to improve the status of untouchables, was only partly realised by the time of his death. In independent India, he succeeded in securing to this otherwise unfortunate community, a preferential treatment till such time they come on a par with other groups socially, economically, educationally, and politically. Constitutionally, the Congress Government also abolished the practice of untouchability in all its forms. But even to this day it has remained only as a 'legal fiction'. Practice of untouchability is common knowledge and caste feelings die hard in older generations. While in younger generations it is being rationalized and practised with the same or even more rigour.

The economic incentives given to untouchables for education; as well as employment opportunities, apart from being inadequate are not properly implemented. Lodging, boarding, fees and scholarship concessions shown to scheduled castes are often unduly taken advantage of by caste Hindus who pass off as scheduled castes to obtain these concessions or to secure seats in technical courses like medical and engineering. Scores of instances can be multiplied to show how the aspirations of the younger generations of scheduled caste members are increasingly thwarted by the officials, village leaders and politicians themselves. They are mockingly called 'government Brahmins'. It is an uphill task for the best qualified scheduled caste candidates to get selected to higher posts. The Government provision for special coaching to scheduled caste candidates appearing for the Indian Administrative and Indian Foreign Service examinations are not viewed kindly by caste Hindu educators. If they could help it, they positively discourage housing such courses in the institutions under their control.

The interpersonal relationships between scheduled castes and caste Hindus, if they have changed at all, have become more sharper in independent India. At no time in the history of India there were so many cases of loot, arson, burning down untouchable households, destroying crops, beating, burning alive and murdering these helpless people than in independent India.



On any smallest pretext, the untouchable will be held to ransom by the caste Hindus. During 1968, at least one Harijan boy was burnt alive in one of the Andhra villages for alleged theft. Elsewhere denuded Harijan women were forced to parade in the village. Wherever Harijan communities have sought to utilise constitutional guarantees such as drawing water from the public well or entering the village temple or other public places, or trying to get the essential services of the village barber or washerman they have met with stiff opposition. Not long ago a Harijan boy seeking the village barber's services in a Mysore village was attacked by the irate barber with a razor, and the boy succumbed to injuries shortly. The constitutional guarantees and their half-hearted implementation have alienated the scheduled castes from sympathies, if any, of the village community.

As already pointed out above, the guarantees provided for untouchables in terms of having access to public places such as wells, coffee houses and temples have remained largely unfulfilled. Because this readily conflicts with the traditional notions of untouchability by breaking the physical and social distance. It is of utmost importance to know how the scheduled caste MPs were denied and are still denied entry into the Viswanath temple at Kashi and Nathuram temple in Rajasthan. When this is the treatment meted out for the political leaders, the plight of the average scheduled caste persons is imaginable.

The untouchability committee constituted by the government of India to assess the social, economic and educational advancement of the untouchables and to find out the general changes that have come about has nearly come to a dismal conclusion after touring many states during 1966. The committee's findings and report when read between lines serve as an eye-opener equally to the Government and people aspiring for a welfare state.

The introduction of Community Development and *Panchayat Raj* institutions to develop rural leadership as part of the processes of decentralization of power have proved in many places the bane of untouchables. Even under decentra-

lization, 'Traditional leadership' has succeeded to power by virtue of its wealth, influence, following and high caste status. Above all it thrives on the strength of dependence of the economically and socially backward castes. The scheduled caste members of the village panchayat meet the constitutional requirement but do not and cannot play the role of leaders. For, how can castes which are traditionally subordinate, economically, politically, juridically and ritually inferior to the upper castes assume such roles? By and large majority of untouchables in rural areas are still dependents only. Abject poverty, appalling illiteracy, and general ignorance set the limit.

Village leadership especially as Chairman or *Sarpanch* is a prerogative of the upper castes. In a leadership study pertaining to the III Parliament (1962-67), scheduled caste members, out of the 53 interviewees, hardly 2-3 persons had served on the village *Panchayat* Board. Further merely being a member of the *Panchayat* makes no difference. A local untouchable cannot dream of dominating politically or act on a par with other members of the *Panchayat*. For this is a contradiction to daily experience when the untouchable needs necessarily to depend upon the mercies of the caste Hindus.

Caste Hindus grudgingly recognise an untouchable who is educated, enlightened, sufficiently rich, but who act exactly in the caste idiom, in that he is expected to be always modest, humble and show a sense of dependence. Any one deviating from this norm and trying to assert himself is bound to feel the adverse public opinion bordering on hostility. Ambedkar and a number of his followers faced the wrath of public opinion, especially Ambedkar spent a major part of his life-time meeting the challenge precisely because of his indomitable intellectual grit that could not compromise with graded inequality and utter subordination of the untouchables to the caste Hindus. In a situation of tension and conflict, the caste Hindus closing all ranks, pitch themselves against untouchables. In Independent India untouchables wherever they have tried for temple entry or drawing water from public wells, have usually felt the



weight of Hindu unity. The pollution barrier separates the scheduled castes from all other Hindu castes.

The political opportunities and roles of scheduled castes at the level of the States and the Centre likewise highlight an intriguing situation in which the scheduled caste MLAs, MPs and Ministers are entrenched and made to function. Although these souls enjoy greater privileges than their rural brethren, yet their position is by no means enviable. Here also it amounts to meeting constitutional requirements by getting scheduled caste men elected as members. But their role is unlike that of other members and they are less equal. Being vocal and original are not assets but great liabilities and positively dangerous. Party tickets are denied, if elected, vocal people are not given responsible positions. Instances abound all over India.

The defeat of Ambedkar in the first general elections in 1952 by a Congress nominee provides a case of stark reality. The Congress candidate claims as a former associate of Ambedkar alleged to have fallen out with the latter on the question of conversion to Buddhism and differences about allocation of seats in local bodies among different untouchable castes, was thus pitched against his own former 'political guru' by the Congress much against his wishes. This suggests that scheduled caste politicians thrive only so long as they remain 'mere yes men' to party leaders and other members who dominate. It is also true that sub-caste differences among the scheduled castes are ruthlessly exploited by the political parties at all levels. A time has come to decide whether untouchables and scheduled castes are synonymous or who constitute scheduled castes. The usage scheduled castes is a blanket term and even 'touchable castes' can pass off as scheduled castes because it is paying them to do so and any day a welcome choice than an untouchable for the others.

Over the years a real gap has developed between the scheduled caste politician, the educated and the common man. The politician gets elected against 'reserved constituency' according to constitutional guarantees. But he does not feel obliged to the cause of the scheduled castes. So long double



member constituency with a general and reserved seat prevailed, the scheduled caste candidate was a 'mere shadow' of the general candidate. Although he got elected, his prestige and status as political leader amounted to nothing. Since the inception of single member 'reserved constituency' partly to overcome the drawbacks of the double member constituency, the scheduled caste politicians, of late, have started thinking aloud that they can get elected even if all the scheduled caste members boycott the election. Given this attitude the provision for political representation is self-defeating. If the scheduled caste politicians do not take care of the scheduled caste problems, who else could? With the exception of a few seniors, for a majority of scheduled caste political leaders, the privileges does not carry the responsibilities and they seem to be passing out.

The role of the educated and the intellectual among the scheduled castes is no better. Most of them are eking out a living by holding some salaried post or the other. Incidentally it is only the government and its offices which can utilise the services of educated untouchables. The doors of private institutions for all practical purposes are closed for them. As a Government employee his position is circumscribed. He cannot play the role of a leader championing the cause of scheduled castes. He cannot even be an effective advisor. This conflicts with his position as 'Government Servant'. The educated and intellectual group is more or less an alienated group interacting within a limited circle. Their economic position permits this. But this in itself does not qualify them to feel or claim social equality with their caste Hindu colleagues and neighbours. Their existence is equally marked by discriminations and humiliation at the hands of upper castes. On social occasions an upper caste office peon will certainly enjoy better status than a scheduled caste officer. Recently it is stated that the scheduled caste officers in the Central Secretariat have separate water containers and glasses for use! Democracy and caste politics seems to have met in the Capital!

Generally speaking, there are three groups among scheduled castes which have failed to see eye to eye. These are broadly

represented by the politician, the educated intellectual and the common man, who currently constitute distinct categories. But they are all the 'same untouchables, from the point of view of caste Hindus.

The practice of untouchability is more rampant in villages than in towns and cities. It is more rigidly practised by women than men. Formal education can bring about certain changes but will not eradicate untouchability. People following traditional occupations, such as scavenging, sweeping, tanning are more susceptible to the discriminated and treated badly than those who have changed their occupation. Yet change of occupation or not being associated with one's traditional occupation does not seem to redeem a person from being identified as an untouchable. For, one of the central cabinet Ministers said, "Since three generations my family had nothing to do with traditional occupation, but the stigma is there". There is a degree of difference but not of kind in all this.

Inter caste marriages between scheduled castes and upper caste Hindus are few and far between to bring about any change in the practice. So long as marriages are arranged by the parents, the elders dominate the scene. Caste sentiments and narrow loyalties prevail over other considerations. Castes continue to function as endogamous units.

Economic betterment has brought about class consciousness but not helped to remove the stigma. Although untouchables could be good at trade and commerce, there is very little opportunity. They have not the means of engaging in trade and commerce like an upper caste person. A grocery or tea shop managed by a scheduled caste person is unthinkable in so far as things get polluted by his touch and there will not be many customers. He can engage himself only in such manual works of lowest prestige and other traditional occupations which 'customarily' belong to him and his kind !

The above in a nutshell are the essential features of social inequality which is rooted in the caste organization. The Indian constitution has banned the practice of untouchability and not

the caste system. Now that political scientists are beginning to construe castes as pressure-groups, together they make the situation complex. If untouchability is part of caste system is central to Hinduism, how can untouchability be eradicated without a drastic remodification of caste organization and Hinduism ?

While class inequalities based on differential position of wealth can be circumvented by a free competitive capitalistic economy, provided there is individual initiative. In the caste system it is social inequalities and not economic inequality that is predominant. How can social equality be brought about by reforms, piecemeal legislation, education, economic betterment, political awareness, or rigorous programmes, unified efforts for self-help by the scheduled castes ? Reform movements and constitutional guarantees unwittingly perpetuate social inequality. But without these provisions the scheduled castes cannot come a step forward. Historically many societies have had problems of social inequality. Ancient Greece, Rome, China, medieval France, and modern Russia to mention only a few. They have all managed to overcome these inequalities in many cases by bloody revolutions. Social inequality is much widespread and deep-rooted in the Indian soil. Reformist movements have thoroughly failed. But the question is will the modern democratic legislation be able to establish social equality ? It may or may not. There needs to be revolutionary changes to tackle illiteracy and effect rapid urbanization and industrialization. These at best usher in small changes but also bring problems. Will social equality remain as ever an ideal or becomes a reality in India ?



## 6

### THE WEAKER SECTIONS OF SOCIETY— THE SCHEDULED CASTES IN INDIA

It is interesting that intellectuals specially sociologists in India have started thinking about the weaker sections in the country. In the present paper I confine myself to the Scheduled Castes, one of the weaker sections. The term Scheduled Castes given currency in 1930s is a blanket term including within itself hundreds of castes and sub-castes which constitute a hierarchy among themselves and in relation to the Hindu castes. The regional, linguistic and cultural differences add to make the picture more complex and complicated.

The world of caste and practice of untouchability have been subjects of serious thinking and research over the past few decades. They have also provided opportunity for reformists and revolutionary social movements historically. In post-independence India and also during the British regime, untouchability in particular has made the Government to assume the role of social workers.

The origin of untouchability remains obscure even in a society like ours with vast literary traditions. In the Vedic period Varna-Ashrama Dharma no doubt carried occupational

attributes though much less rigorously and these get themselves crystallized in due course. The post-Vedic period, the Epics, Puranas and Upanishadic times in particular, laid the firm foundation for the Indian social structure. The several law givers also contributed their mite, in particular the writings of Manu stands out as a beacon light on the horizons of Indian caste system.

Birth became the decisive criterion of membership in the caste. Occupational attributes of caste became more pronounced and carried values of rank and status. Some occupations were of high status and rank, others carried low rank and status. Groups following particular occupations came to enjoy social position commensurate with caste occupations. For instance, priesthood and scholarship in sacred literature carried higher values thus enjoining superior position to the Brahmins. Scavenging and leather work correspondingly carried low social status. Multiplication and classification of castes and sub-castes as well as occupations continued unchecked since then, resulting in a social hierarchy.

The caste system with its social hierarchy and implicit inequality of status and rank, in religious, educational, economic, political and juridical relationships among caste groups has been in existence from the earliest known historical times. At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmins, untouchables come at the bottom end. Ritual purity and pollution as part of Hinduism have pervaded all the walks of life. A gradation or hierarchy of values obtains in most mundane things as well. Food, cloth, metals, in a word, everything that surrounds human life carry values, not necessarily always based on their utility. High rank is usually associated with economically costly items like silk cloth, precious metals like gold and silver which at least in the past only higher castes could possess.

Practices, which were initiated with such elaborate value system associated with them, in the course of time, ceased to be voluntary. They became part of the tradition, customarily enforced and later supported by public opinion and

ruling powers. In all, this, higher the status of caste, greater were the rank and privileges, in ritual, educational, economic, political and juridical powers. The lower castes were reduced to utter subordination devoid of many privileges and occupied the lower rungs of the hierarchical ladder.

Hinduism and the caste system are so much intertwined with one another that together they cover all the temporal and spiritual aspects of life. The educational, economic and political aspects of life belong to secular sphere and are associated with achieved status. In the Indian context, these areas of life have been subjected to and controlled by the religious and caste values to such an extent and are so loaded with notions of Dharma and Karma that people are generally afraid of transgressing the boundaries. A poor Brahmin and a rich untouchable are hardly comparable in terms of status and rank even under the present changed circumstances.

The supremacy of the religious values and Brahmins as the only authority being supposed to have mastery to interpret their religious implications gave them a definite edge over everybody else as custodians of all knowledge. Life on the earth and life after death, as developed in the theory of Karma and transmigration of soul coloured all secular and spiritual activities.

By and large, one sees the ascendancy of Brahmanical values throughout the centuries and these are held against all odds. In fact, the legendary attribute of the curse of the Brahmin, the worst that could be invited by anybody, seem to have held the sway. No one really tried to seriously challenge his spiritual authority and power. All the protest and reform attempts made from time to time historically amount to 'rituals of rebellious' which hardly meant a serious threat. The various political powers themselves were dependent on the advice, blessings and good offices of the Brahmins. Hence the Brahmins as a class and the Brahmanical values as a category have enveloped all aspects of life and continue to persist.



In all this the most deprived and depraved class of people are the untouchable group with a conglomeration of castes and sub-castes within it. In ancient India it was just an emerging category which got crystallized with the passage of time. In medieval period, even under the impact of Muslim rule, their position was by no means better off. Conversion to Islam in some ways ushered in changes but hardly brought about structural changes.

The British who succeeded the Muslim rulers took time to realise the intricacies of the Indian social structure. Since they were interested in the political consolidation of their position, their openly declared policy was one of 'non-interference' in the social and religious matters of the people of India. Christianity which came to India, like Islam, from outside, added another dimension to the existing social categories. Conversion to Christianity by lower castes and upper castes for several reasons did not help to bridge the gulf between them. The pre-conversion caste status, rank and values continued and loomed large influencing all kinds of social intercourse.

The indigenous reform movements starting from Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, including Veerasaivism in the South, rebelled against caste rigidities and other social evils. The founders of most of these movements themselves came from upper castes and as one could glean, the results of these attempts to reform Hinduism could not really succeed. Preaching against caste differences and discriminations, aspiration to establish social equality and justice at best helped the middle range caste-groups and not really the down-trodden to raise their status.

Ritual purity and pollution, the barrier which separates the untouchable groups from others in India meant that these people could not be incorporated into the mainstream in Hinduism and largely remained so even under the impact of foreign and indigenous movements including that of Ambedkar's neo-Buddhism. It is noteworthy, how all these attempts were conceived and covered with religious ideology.

There is hardly a movement which attempted to influence the minds of the people minus the religious idiom. In this sense religion—old and new—provide and act as opiate to masses. People are generally susceptible to religious ideologies. It is far more easier to win over people by giving a religious appeal and character to a movement than merely trying to introduce changes in the economic and political arenas.

The Scheduled Castes and Tribes, their problems, have assumed new dimensions in the post-independence India. Historically, they have been an ever-growing menace to national and social integration. Each of the conscious and unconscious attempts made to eradicate the evils of caste system has made the system much more vulnerable and monstrous to the down-trodden groups. The situation can be compared only marginally with their counterparts, the Negroes of America and South Africa and similar groups elsewhere.

For the present, I will briefly touch upon the coming to lime light of the woes of the group, largely by the efforts made by the late Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the controversy between Gandhi and Ambedkar that resulted in the Poona Pact. During the post-independence period, in contemporary India, under parliamentary democracy, these issues are of vital importance precisely because the problems continue unabated and are becoming sources of social unrest in spite of protectionist policy adopted by the Government.

During the Independence Movement the National Congress remained largely oblivious of the fact that there were social groups in the country which were scorned at and relegated to a position worse than of animals. The leadership in the Congress again was largely confined to upper castes and richer sections. They hardly perceived the sufferings of the lower and lowest groups. Social inequality and injustice at its worst afflicted the untouchable caste groups.

From among the neglected sections there arose Ambedkar as a champion and spokesman of the millions of dumb human beings. When he made his demands on behalf of the untouch-



able groups the ruling British Government conceded political representation to them by the Communal Award. Gandhi and the Congress were quick to grasp the implications of the same. Already staggered by the demands of Muslims, the Hindu leaders were not at all in favour of recognizing the demands of untouchable separatism.

Gandhi promptly undertook fast unto death for the withdrawal of the Communal Award. Ambedkar was finally coerced to sign the Poona Pact to save the precious life of Mahatma by sacrificing the cause of millions of untouchables. Though all this is a part of history of the struggle of Indian untouchables under a leader who had sprung up from among them by chance coincidence, the cause of untouchables was furthered in the hands of Ambedkar as the chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee.

Ambedkar was forced to agree that untouchables were Hindus and that their conditions had to be ameliorated from within the social system. Personally he was bitter against Hinduism and the caste system and became a Buddhist in the last days of his life. But he made a fresh bid in the Constitution to provide measures for the betterment of these communities. The lot of the millions of illiterate poor untouchables needed a national awakening both among the untouchables and the caste Hindus. Therefore, the solution to the problems was visualised at national level and not just at State levels.

A series of measures was provided to combat against social evils consequent upon social discrimination and the practice of untouchability. Social discrimination is loaded with differential values, often supported and sanctioned by religious beliefs and practices. Provisions to eliminate discrimination, and to establish social equality have to be supported from other possible sources. Social inequality and discrimination are inherent and therefore ascriptive. It is hardly possible to alter ascriptive values by legislation.

In the Constitution economic, political, educational facilities are incorporated for the upliftment of the secular position of the untouchables. Ambedkar seems to have believed that as



the process of modernization sets in, acquired status and the values associated with it would gradually displace values and status based on ascription. The tensions which we are witnessing in contemporary India between the Scheduled Castes and non-Scheduled Castes may be rightly described as a clash between the traditional and emergent values.

The achievement oriented tradition still has to take its roots. But before it could become possible, the middle range clean upper castes which have emerged as dominant groups in all the States as a result of the linguistic reorganization have come to believe, that if this transformation is allowed, they would be the losers for good. Hence, fierce attempts are made to thwart all well-intentioned Government policies meant to uplift the Scheduled Castes.

Access to public places like temples, tea shops, drinking water places and places of essential services like hair-cutting saloons are fraught with extreme difficulty in contemporary India. The Scheduled Caste population is spread out and is essentially a minority in almost all the villages in India. These people can hardly hope to assert themselves to avail the constitutional benefits. That each one should know one's place in the hierarchy, has such a stronghold in the minds of people, that any attempts by the low caste people to break this barrier is resisted by all upper castes in addition to, sometimes, by other religious minorities in the village situation.

Political reservations are given from village panchayat to the parliament. The party leadership has vested interest in maintaining the same. In fact a good number of Indian political parties, national and regional, conform closely to the patterns of caste groups in the country. The Scheduled Caste members in political parties remain essentially subordinate to the party bosses. No Scheduled Caste leaders worth the name are allowed to grow within the political parties and they are all contained and curbed effectively.

Political reservation and representation is a constitutional obligation. It is also a vote catching mechanism for successful political parties. The Scheduled Castes are lured to vote by

promising them many returns. The Scheduled Caste political leaders are bound and regulated by party interests overlooking sometimes interests of their castes. This has created two different situations. The Scheduled Caste politicians firstly do not wish to be identified as Scheduled Caste leaders, presumably on the same lines such as there are no Brahmin or other caste leaders. Secondly there is a growing tendency among the Scheduled Caste politicians to overlook and brush aside the problems of Scheduled Castes precisely because 'general' votes in 'reserved' constituencies outnumber the Scheduled Caste votes. As such the politicians from these caste groups need not be under an obligation to the voters of their castes. The access to power enhances the secular status and rank of Scheduled Caste political leaders. So the class mass differences are inevitable amongst themselves.

Political reservation and representation minus the emergence of effective leadership among the Scheduled Castes is a tragedy. Given the political mechanization, unscrupulous methods, bossism, exploitation, corruption and favouritism, it is an uphill task for a Scheduled Caste politician to emerge as an effective and generally accepted leader. Social values die hard. An ambitious and aspiring Scheduled Caste politician can be cut underneath his feet. Rivalry and pitting one against another, exploiting sub-caste differences etc., can be used as political weapons to contain them eternally by caste Hindu politicians. The political game is an important mechanism in democracy. The economics of politics is frightening and it is very difficult to visualise whether Scheduled Caste politicians can ever reach a bargaining position, get weaned of their dependence and have access to real power.

The various provisions made in the Constitution to bring about economic benefits have touched only the fringe. All kinds of economic assistance have roused the anti-Scheduled Caste feelings among the non-Scheduled Castes. The knowledge of availability of these benefits itself is limited to a small and negligible number in urban/town and rural areas. It is only the vocal and advanced sections among the Scheduled Castes who have availed themselves of most of the benefits. These



are the people who have also acquired other forms of assets and influence and wield some power.

Since nearly ninety per cent of the Scheduled Caste population is scattered in rural areas, they are the ones who are the worst hit and continue to suffer. The knowledge of the Constitutional benefits is known to about 10—15 per cent of those in rural areas. Similarly economic benefits either in the form of land, house-site, building material, loan and so forth have proved much more deterrent. The land reform-ceiling and distribution of surplus land among the Scheduled Castes has led to much ill-feeling among the non-Scheduled castes. One wonders whether this measure could succeed at all at any time. In many cases it has let loose the anger and wrath of caste Hindus besides continued circumvention of the law itself.

Segregation based on caste lines in residential pattern is an age-old practice and very little could be done to curb this in rural India, though in towns and cities it could be tackled and set right. Distribution of house sites and construction of Janata Houses by the Government, though laudable, unfortunately have now thrown the Scheduled Caste people, further away from village location. This means again total segregation. Further, the new locations and their Scheduled Caste inhabitants can be easily held to ransom by irate villagers. Settlements can be set on fire, people beaten up and all kinds of atrocities directed without affecting the rest of the village community.

Dependent as they are economically, the Scheduled Caste population has to eke out their livelihood by selling their labour. That their economic vulnerability can be totally exploited by the villagers is born out by many instances of total boycott of the Scheduled Caste population in villages. In Karnataka this was reported recently from a remote village in the Bidar district. The police officials who went to the rescue of these people were humiliated and beaten up by the villagers. The State Government denied anything like that while the press and others who visited the village came out with stories of horrible



woes and sufferings of the Scheduled Caste inhabitants living in constant fear of death.

Abolition of bonded labour and redeeming the borrowers from the clutches of local money lenders, similarly have yet to produce the desired effects. Land distribution among the Scheduled Castes by Government has led to resentment and increase in physical violence and burning down of crops. In fact every effort made by the Government to create opportunities to make the Scheduled Castes economically viable and sound have led to increase jealousy and hatred among the non-Scheduled Castes. All these are conceived as a direct threat to undermine the upper castes. Slightest attempts on the part of the Scheduled Castes to assert themselves and their claims for constitutional privileges have led to clashes.

Actually the Constitutional benefits have covered only a fraction of the Scheduled Caste population, while most of the deserving among them have not even the slightest ideas of these benefits. The publicity, bordering on propaganda, given by the Government agencies regarding the benefits in a way has been responsible to make the non-Scheduled Castes much more sensitive to the ideas of deprivation. People are keen that the protectionist policy should not be there. They think that such preferential discrimination is the antithesis of democracy.

The Government machinery by itself is inadequate and too slow to move even under emergent conditions. So when clashes occur, it is the weaker sections who are put to plight and often relieved of everything including life. Their womenfolk are wilfully subjected to illtreatment. Their modesty is meddled with. Denuding, raping and murdering women of all ages to frighten the aspiring Scheduled Castes, is one of the techniques evolved in recent years, while the Scheduled Caste menfolk are harassed and often axed to death for alleged theft or molestation of caste Hindu women.

Even if an army stands by, it is doubtful that such cases can be curbed in the immediate future. The awakening which

has come about in certain pockets of the Scheduled Castes population, more particularly among the educated, not only resist caste Hindu assaults but are trying to organize the weaker sections to meet the eventualities. This is just making a beginning and they may not be a match to well organized, rich, influential and powerful caste Hindus who can both inflict innumerable miseries on the Scheduled Castes, and who also seek protection for themselves by using the Government machinery often against the Scheduled Castes themselves as law-breakers. Kilvanmani incident of Tanjore district in Tamil Nadu is not an isolated event. Similar follow up cases have been fairly widespread throughout the country.

Next to political reservations, some significant advances have been made in educational concessions. This again is causing heart burning among the non-Scheduled Castes. Reservation of seats in colleges, technical and professional courses, and other facilities given to the Scheduled Caste students are severely criticised as wilful lowering of standards, at the cost of merit. This situation causes mental torture to the Scheduled Caste students and adversely affects their educational pursuits.

Demands of social justice and achievement oriented courses of action, although independent, can be made dependent variables. For even among the Scheduled Castes, increasing number of merited students are emerging. There is competition from among the Scheduled Castes themselves for the reserved seats. Effects of the denial of any opportunities for formal education for centuries cannot be set right overnight. What militates perhaps is the backlog of social heritage and unfavourable environmental surroundings. It is not at all correct to say that educational standards are lowering because of reservationist policy. The reasons for the lowering of standards have to be searched for elsewhere too.

Similarly reservation of jobs is said to have corroded the efficiency in administration. Barring class IV employment, in all other categories, the quota is never filled up. The Government departments themselves have paid lip service to reserva-



tion, while semi-Government and private organizations largely flout the rules. Yet by dint of hard work a class of officers among the Scheduled Castes has emerged, but they can hardly lead the Scheduled Caste masses. The official class is a small and self-contented group who can neither exploit nor help to further the cause of the Scheduled Caste masses except trying for their own chances of success—appointment, promotions—with which they are naturally concerned like everybody else.

In some ways it is only in Maharashtra, even after the exit of Ambedkar, attempts to organize the Scheduled Castes are continued. During the lifetime of Ambedkar, he tried to organize Labour Party, then the Scheduled Castes Federation and finally, the Republican Party of India. But these organizations did not have a smooth sailing. The Republican Party factions are too well-known and the party virtually could do nothing positive for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes.

Exasperated by the internal fights and factionalism among the elderly leaders of the Republican Party, younger generation sprang up in the name of Dalit Panthers, styled after the American 'Black Panthers', in recent years. They made themselves felt by Government and others. Educated Scheduled Caste youths outside Maharashtra have also come under their influence to some extent. But in Maharashtra itself the Dalit Panthers movement was closed in from many sides. The ruling Congress Party lured some of the leaders of the Dalit Panthers and also helped to bridge the factional differences in the Republican Party. What could have become a major organization working for the welfare of the Scheduled Castes was steadily undermined by a variety of forces. Only in literary field some of them remain active today. Community-based political organizations, especially of the down-trodden, have little success. A very pathetic situation indeed.

The foresight with which Ambedkar established the educational institutions at Aurangabad and Bombay was commendable. They have played a positive role. Yet when the Neo-Buddhists and Scheduled Castes of Maharashtra wanted the Marathwada University to be named after Ambedkar, one of



the illustrious son of Maharashtra, there was bitter opposition from the caste Hindus. It is strange and painful to dub Ambedkar as a narrow communal leader. The downtrodden, who number several millions in the country, are as much indebted to Ambedkar for focusing the world attention on the plight of India's untouchables, as should be the Hindus for the services rendered by him.

The Government as a reform agent can achieve only limited objectives. While it has championed the cause of weaker sections, minorities and backward classes, it cannot cope up with the colossal tasks ahead. Reservations if continued indefinitely will convert themselves into vested interests. The political patronage will lead to social estrangement among the people and politicians as big brothers trying to increase the area of their influence have succeeded in floating and heading a plethora of communal organizations in recent years.

Whatever changes might have occurred, one thing is certain that there is very little sharing of political power between upper and lower caste politicians both in the parties and in the Government. Andhra, Bihar and Rajasthan which have had Scheduled Caste chief ministers may be exceptions and such things could happen under exigencies and peculiar circumstances. The ameliorative measures—Constitutional provisions—under democracy will take a very long time to solve the pressing problems of the Scheduled Castes. Further structural changes, if any, cannot be simply assumed. The caste system has a notoriety about it, incorporating and absorbing everything within itself including contradictions and conflicts.

Historically caste system has withstood all attempts made to modify or destroy it. It has absorbed various shocks. Absorptions of Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam are but few cases providing elasticity of the system. Unless there are structural changes, values will not alter. So long as old values continue, snoberies of caste and also untouchability will continue, perhaps in different ways and shades. Government efforts are not matched by voluntary organisations in India. For bringing about large scale awakening among the

Scheduled Castes and non-Scheduled Castes, it is necessary that they are made aware of the human problems. The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Caste sympathisers can organise and exert pressure on the Government. For it is only under pressure that the Government machinery will move at some speed. Gradually Scheduled Caste problems should converge with those of other weaker sections. Equality, justice and fair play have to be achieved by mobilizing all those who are denied the same. Social mobility cannot be achieved when other groups are not willing to concede. This is exactly what is happening with new converts to Buddhism. When the secular position of the people remain unchanged, change of religion hardly matters. Lot of tensions build up when one group wishes to push itself while other groups do not concede to its claim.

The history of the Backward Class Movement in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere highlights how the forward groups among some of the backward communities seized the opportunity to lead the movement. In this process they tried to consolidate their positions which was often detrimental to the aspirations and development of other backward classes. These lessons should provide guidelines. Both communal organizations and continued categorization and patronage extended by the Government to some caste groups will add to the existing divisive forces. Even when the Government wants to single out communities and groups for preferential treatment, the programme should be made time bound. Instead of giving doles, substantive assistance should be given to strengthen the group economically and educationally. Once certain level is achieved, the benefits should be gradually withdrawn.

In fact it is a vicious circle within which the social problems of the scheduled castes are revolving. Doles are given to strengthen their secular position. In this process the concerned person has to constantly declare that he comes from such and such low caste. Such public demonstration of caste status for personal benefit can never help a man to psychologically rise above narrow loyalties or to free himself from feeling constantly inferior. It is necessary for the government to devise



measures and initiate a policy to strengthen weaker sections in general and the scheduled castes in particular.

A number of new approaches may have to be devised. Scheduling or de-scheduling need not go by entire groups, but by families. Similarly the unnecessary propaganda regarding the benefits to the scheduled castes which adversely affects them may be stopped by the government. Official records and discussions in the Legislative Assemblies and Parliament should serve the purpose. Economic diversification, increased educational facilities coupled with universal literacy perhaps would help to awaken the people.

Increased tensions and conflicts which the country-side witness today may be rightly viewed as leading to changes. Unfortunately, they may demoralise the scheduled castes and make them victims of circumstances. The dominant upper caste groups with landed property have emerged so strong that they influence and control policies often twisting them for their own benefits. The government should not play itself into the hands of vested interests, but in a democracy ambition knows no scruples.

There are two ways in which the scheduled caste problems can be solved. Firstly within the existing system, hoping that constitutional benefits would continue, piecemeal development of the community will take place. This is a very slow process which is fraught with internal contradictions. Public opinion, as pointed out earlier, is already against the policy which is dubbed as reverse discrimination.

Only political and educational benefits are visibly used. Political reservations have catered to individual families, which in turn perhaps have helped their kith and kin. In each state there have been a monopoly of some half a dozen families. In the Centre till recently except for one person no one could continue as a minister. From the entire scheduled caste political leadership, apart from its being manipulated by upper caste party bosses, no one is allowed or tolerated to emerge powerful. This kind of dependency restricts



their role. They always are made to play second fiddle and there is no genuine leadership as for instance, of the type provided by Ambedkar. Keeping the scheduled caste political leaders as show-pieces, while perennially cutting at the roots to prevent them emerging strong, was not the purpose with which political reservations were given.

Political reservations should be tagged with responsibility to focus attention on the scheduled caste problems. Given this, the role of the scheduled caste politician will become more purposive and less subjective. They have to be social workers-cum-politicians and not the other way round. The handpicked scheduled caste politicians and the speed with which they are lured to change party affiliation, a general malady, make a mockery of reservations. As long as this continues only individual families will benefit themselves in the name of the community. This amounts to exploiting the community for personal benefits. Can this be prevented or set right within the framework of political processes in India ?

Education and white collar jobs are the well known avenues leading to achieved status. Though in the case of scheduled castes it is not readily happening, but over a period of time it is bound to come about amongst themselves and in relation to others. The class structure which has always co-existed with the caste structure finds a favourable milieu with the scheduled caste educated groups. This is again a slow process and the status of the entire scheduled caste communities cannot be improved.

The conflict between the achieved status and ascribed status—class and caste—cannot be easily resolved in the case of scheduled castes. What the scheduled castes desire is an honourable social position to the entire lot, no matter what kind of internal contradictions persist among themselves. The social hierarchy and gradation have always figured in public relation in the Indian context. So mere abolition of untouchability practices and making their observance a cognizable offence, involving the legal processes have made the situation more complex and complicated.

By and large the enlightened Hindu sympathisers of the scheduled castes are for reforms. They wish that the scheduled caste should get education, achieve economic betterment and come up in life. But when it comes to tackle traditional values, status and so forth they are not very keen or sure where it will lead. Equality of opportunity in secular life, and not achievement of social equality in absolute terms, seems to guide their thoughts and actions. They can rationalise that structural changes will come about, given the improvement in secular life. The Indian untouchable *vis-a-vis* the history of caste system unfortunately belies this.

The democratic form of government cannot interfere with social lives of the people and coerce them constantly. Both in public and in private matters, the government has to carry the wishes of the majority with it. Given the existing machinery, form of government and policies, it will take a very long time and one can never be sure of the results. The scheduled caste problems will continue to persist and there will be more violence and tensions between the caste Hindus and aspiring scheduled castes.

If the existing system is not acceptable, then the scheduled castes should organize themselves and take more drastic steps. Revolutionary changes cannot occur when only a neglected section of people rise in revolt. This can be curbed with an iron hand both by the government and public in general. The issues have to be focused internationally. By doing this once again the methodical slow process sets in. The scheduled caste alone cannot organize and successfully lead the movement. All the deprived and down-trodden across the castes have to come together. Caste interests need cut across class interests.

There will be more violence and bloodshed, with determined efforts to resolve the problems afflicting the scheduled castes. A good number of scheduled caste people themselves may get eliminated in this process. Though it is often generalized that Indian soil and climate are not conducive to



violence and revolution, pressure tactics are paying good dividends under democracy. Pressure could be brought to bear upon the government to use extra legal measures to resolve the problems.

So far all the efforts made by the government and the money used in the name of the scheduled castes have gone down the drain. Only few have been benefited. Exploitation of the scheduled castes continues. Apathy of the officials and the ambitious and unscrupulous men in public life has rendered the welfare measures a source of corruption and nepotism.

Punishing the guilty is one way of containing corruption and nepotism. Instead, if the measures themselves are made such that middle men will not have a role to play, they would prove to be useful. For all economic, educational and job matters, the government should have direct control and efficient machinery. For instance, land need not be distributed by cents and acres to individual scheduled caste families. Deserving scheduled [caste and non-scheduled caste families can be settled on government farms and payment can be made on work point. Agro-industries and marketing facilities be promoted. Rights to property can be made secondary and not fundamental.

Food, shelter, clothing, a minimum standard of life have to be ensured to all. To this extent, rights to private property be limited and made secondary. Since people have never showed inclination to give up property rights voluntarily, beginning may be made with sections of people coming under direct control of the government. Right to acquire and own only limited amount of property may be given to all people.

Awakening and organizing the scheduled castes, voluntary organizations taking up the cause in right earnest, the government machinery gearing up its actions in addition to evolving new policies and approaches, to put it modestly, can usher in changes over a period of time. There is no national



consciousness with regard to the scheduled caste problem as is the case with religious minorities. While religious minorities can always project their image outside the country and politicise their issues, the scheduled castes have suffered for long, languishing for liberation. Betterment which is coming in the form of doles that are neither sufficient nor free from foul play. The entire process is anything but short of revolutionary changes.

## PANCHAYATI RAJ AND WEAKER SECTIONS

I wish to discuss in this paper the structural-functional role relationships of Panchayati Raj institutions and personnel. In doing this I will largely draw upon recent empirical studies carried out in Karnataka during the last 6-7 years. To what extent the Fifth Five Year Plan can influence these role-relationships in rural India has to be viewed in the light of experience. Further, the recent declaration of National Emergency, and the Prime Minister's 20-point economic programmes; their meaning, content and impact if any, are outside the purview of the present analysis. Although given the structural constraints, one is almost tempted to predict about the possible outcome as not being either radical or depart very much from the traditional lines.

Weaker Sections, Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes and Tribes and a plethora of similar concepts currently used in India, as descriptive terms to indicate a group of people in fact are blanket terms. Even their counterpart Indian concepts like "Durbal or Dalit Varg" hardly enables one to know the implications and they are not by any means self-explanatory either.

However, going by the spirit of the implicit meaning and the conventions that have developed around these concepts over the years, under Weaker Sections, I am inclined to include such groups of people who are economically, politically, educationally very backward and suffer socio-religious discrimination on account of the hoary traditions of caste-outcaste based on ritual purity and pollution.

The former untouchables and Tribal people who largely fill the present day Scheduled Castes and Tribes, also known as Harijans and Girijans approximate to the description given above, although there are some exceptions.

The constitution of India has, in addition to others, singled out these groups for political representation at various level starting from the Village to the Parliament and State Assemblies in between. Such political representation is envisaged to create political awareness and help develop leadership at grass-roots level. The assumption is that by a system of deliberate 'reservations' and 'protective discrimination', the depressed and suppressed communities who have remained like dumb cattle for centuries may gradually be drawn into the main stream. Once there is political awakening, the matching socio-economic and educational measures go a long way in lessening the evils and hardships caused by the snobberies of caste and untouchability. While political representation at upper levels is fully exploited with the tacit support of political parties at lower levels, especially villages, far from developing grass-root-leadership it has often created cleavages among Scheduled Castes and to the advantage of upper castes.

The socio-economic measures hinge on political pressures generated by the knowledgeable sections of particular caste groups. This cannot be said to be positive in the case of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. There are built-in drawbacks which prevent people of these categories to be vocal and assertive and much less to mobilise. Poverty, ignorance, illiteracy the near total dependence on upper castes, and above all the lowest ritual rank which makes them a constant source of pollution to caste Hindus certainly limits the scope of the roles they could play as Panchayat members.



The numerical preponderance of Scheduled Castes in village India can be said to be double-edged and doubly disadvantaged. Generally they are thinly distributed in most of the villages in comparison with the upper castes. Even where their number is preponderant, they are divided into numerous sub-castes, differences being unbridgeable and these differences are exploited to the best advantage of the upper castes as will be substantiated from field data below:

Under all circumstances—actual and hypothetical—the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes cannot function on a footing of equality with upper castes, either as citizens of a democratic country or as members involved in the democratic political bodies. The basic inconsistencies involved in the Indian Social Structure which has existed and thrived on social inequality cannot be set right by a system of political ideology and structure which has its hunch in equality.

Participation in elections and the right to vote, could be argued as powerful weapons in the hands of citizens in a democracy. But unfortunately these rights are underscored by virtue of the appalling illiteracy and the successful role of the 'middlemen', the village power elites, who have emerged as 'vote banks' and thus make the illiterate masses to vote as 'directed' which leaves little room for discretion. In fact the role of Weaker Sections as citizens and as members of Panchayats can hardly go against the powerful current of power elites. If they did go against, the economic sanctions are invoked.

For majority of Weaker Sections are Agricultural labourers they depend on the upper castes for their existence. Even where they hold little land the holdings are not viable units. In the village situation there are hundreds and thousands of occasions when the Scheduled Castes and other Weaker Sections are dependent on the rich, powerful upper castes. They cannot invite the wrath of upper castes by trying to exercise their rights independently. Life becomes intolerably miserable for Scheduled Castes and this is being reported from different parts of the country.

The creation of linguistic States has given rise to the emergence of regionally 'dominant' groups which have concentrated landed wealth, gained political power and thus keep the traditionally depressed people even more oppressed under democratic regime and in the name of democracy. It is now more easy for them to manipulate and hold these people to ransom than it was in pre-independence days. The Marathas in Maharashtra, the Reddies and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh, the Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka, the Mudaliars, Thakurs and the Jats are only a few instances to quote.

All the efforts made by the Government to uplift the Weaker Sections in the country over the last quarter of the century are substantially thwarted. Firstly, the programmes are not properly implemented. Secondly, no agency has tried to educate the Scheduled Castes on the changed situation, their new position, rights and privileges. They are not redeemed from the grip of traditional ways and views. Government agency cannot become a substitute for local situations.

At this point it could be even argued whether the constitutional abolition of the practice of untouchability and making it a punishable offence has any meaning to the rural people in general and Scheduled Castes in particular. Without preparing the grounds properly, mere abolition of a traditional practice by a streak stroke of pen seems to be nasty. For it is a deep-rooted malady which cannot be cured without major operations. That the practice of untouchability continues unabated in rural and even urban India is common knowledge. Without striking at the institution of caste which lends substance to untouchability and all the social stigma, abolition of untouchability sounds like a make-believe attempt *at reform and not change*.

The directed changes which the Community Development Programmes envisaged have undoubtedly ushered in some changes in rural India. Agriculture and thereby the green revolution that has come about in some places is one aspect of change. Establishment of Village Panchayats and democratic elections of members, Chairman and Vice-Chairman, also the



representation of women and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes on these bodies was intended to bring about changes. The co-operative societies, on the other hand, were expected to help the village community to become more self-reliant.

The emphasis on development welfare activities revolve around the Panchayat personnel and the role they play. But what is intriguing is to what extent the Panchayats have fulfilled these expectations, what are the impediments, if any, which obstruct the creative role which the Panchayats could play? What role the Scheduled Castes and Lady members of Village Panchayats play? Has it brought about any change in attitudes and values? How inter-personnel and inter-group relationships are articulated?

To these and a number of other related questions, I feel it best to draw on empirical data and allow the facts to speak for themselves. For purposes of this analysis, I exclude Lady members, although in one sense even women can be classified as constituting Weaker Sections. The very fact that representation of women on the Panchayat is made obligatory is itself indicative of the special attention paid to them with a view to draw them away from the confines of kitchen and child rearing.

The representation of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes on Village Statutory Panchayats has not brought about substantial changes in the situation. Economically, educationally, socially their position continues to be nearly the same. Some benefits have been, however, availed in the field of education. But this is restricted to a few particularly in urban India.

Political representation has not helped to bring about the emergence of Scheduled Caste leaders in rural India. This will not come about in the existing conditions. Scheduled Castes political leadership at upper levels is as divided and ineffective as one could imagine. There is no feeding back and forth of leadership among Scheduled Castes. At upper levels it is almost a family concern of few ambitious persons, while at the top, it is just personal considerations and interests that



dominate rather than the interests of the Scheduled Castes as a category chosen for special treatment.

The vocal and assertive Scheduled Caste political leaders even at higher levels are not tolerated. They are curbed by any means available. The crisis of Scheduled Caste Ministers of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu during 1973-1974 is an eye-opener in this direction. If this is so at higher level, how much more true it is at local, *i.e.*, level of villages, where face-to-face primary relationships often make it extremely difficult to assert or float the authority of the traditional elites. In a homogeneous community which is often projected by Indian village life, traditions, traditional values, customs and beliefs have continued. A democratic institution like the Panchayat which is superimposed on these, can hardly make a dent.

The political culture which has developed in the last 25 years has led to a greater concentration of power, instead of decentralization in the hands of traditionally powerful sections both Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Barring Scheduled Castes, caste-groups have assumed new roles to play. They have become pressure groups and politicization has taken place.

The network of relationships which link the lower and upper levels is absent among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, while in the case of others, such networks lend support both vertically and horizontally. All India caste Associations like Yadavas, Smiths and many more have emerged. A degree of fusion has come about in the light of political awakening. Fission seems to play an important role as far as Scheduled Castes are concerned.

Turning from these general considerations to actual empirical studies, I will substantiate how Panchayati Raj institutions instead of being a boon have turned out to be a bane. This has added a new dimension to the existing number of problems. The Panchayat's major functions being developmental in nature, quite often it is the Chairman and Vice-Chairman including the Panchayat Secretary who decides the course of actions and members seldom participate in discussions. The monthly meetings of Statutory Panchayats take place all but in

name and on paper. Often the minutes are sent round to obtain the signature of the Panchayat members.

Most of the Panchayat members are ignorant of the functions and so some are indifferent. The members of the Weaker Sections serving on Panchayats seldom know why they are there and what they are expected to do. The situation has not altered much in the last 10-12 years. Further since 1960's there are only two Panchayat elections and those who were dominating the Panchayat have continued to do so without let or hindrance. The educative value of elections is minimised to the extent elections have become few and far between. In the meantime the position of the Weaker Sections, has become more vulnerable. To-day, economically there are more poorer people among Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, than perhaps during 1950's. Inflation, increase in population, economic stagnation and political exploitation have rendered these people more helpless. All the government measures of Social Welfare have not reached or even heard of by these people. Where benefits were availed, it has come to light that they were lost within a very short period to the ambitious upper caste neighbours with a covering eye. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes have worked as labourers on their own land granted by the government to them without even known that they owned the land. Dr. T. S. Epstein has highlighted this in her re-study of Mandya villages. Similar things have happened with the Jenu Kurubas also. In fact such instances could be multiplied endlessly.

In Kshetra village, in Bellary district, for more than two decades the village panchayat was dominated by a Kshatriya President/Chairman. Although there were many Lingayat members, they could not displace the President/Chairman, coming from a minority group. The Scheduled Caste Panchayat members were totally ignorant and carried out menial work as usual at the instance of the Chairman. By 1968, a change in Panchayat leadership has come about. The ailing Kshatriya Chairman decided it unanimously in favour of a Lingayat magnate whose family supported the Kshatriyas for decades.



The new Chairman has no interest in Panchayat matters or the village affairs. He is more interested in agriculture and looking after the fields. It is possible that a clever Panchayat Secretary can manoeuvre the whole proceedings of the Panchayat. All the Panchayat members, most of them youngsters in their 30's have as a matter of fact succeeded the offices by virtue of their elders having held these positions. Before 1968, there were 2 Scheduled Caste Panchayat members from Kshetra apart from a Lambani coming from another nearby hamlet which was part of Kshetra revenue village. To-day, Kshetra has just one Scheduled Caste member and it can be concluded that no developmental works are underway, other than what the Kshatriya Chairman had done during his lengthy regime before 1968.

Take the case of two more villages within a radius of 10 miles from Mysore city. One is an irrigated village in Mandya district, the other is a dry village in Mysore District. Belagola, the irrigated village has 531 households with 2,500 people representing 18 castes. Okkaligas constitute 54.2 per cent, while Scheduled Castes constitute about 15 per cent of the population. Okkaligas own 80.3 per cent and 85 per cent of wet and dry land out of total of 1,004 and 935 acres while untouchables own 10 per cent and 6.4 per cent respectively. The village has always been dominated, numerically, economically, politically, now educationally by Okkaligas. I shall give a brief history of village Panchayat from 1940's to highlight this.

Belagola in the erstwhile Mysore State had a village Panchayat as early as 1941. There were 10 members including the Chairman and Secretary and 8 out of 10 were Okkaligas, while the Chairman and the Secretary were Okkaligas. There were no Scheduled Castes, but there was a Brahmin member.

The 1944 Village Panchayat Board had 12 members, of which including the Chairman and the Secretary 10 were Okkaligas. The Panchayat constituted in 1948 consisted of 12 members. Okkaliga domination continued. The chairman of 1948 continued up to 1968, a solid 20 years even under changed system with election to offices is an amazing fact.



The first Statutory Panchayat which was constituted in 1956, consisted of 20 members of whom 15 were Okkaligas including the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman. There were for the first time two Scheduled Caste members. The next Panchayat constituted in 1960 had 10 Okkaligas including Chairman and Vice-Chairman out of 13 members. In both these Panchayats, there was no election worth the name. The village elders and important caste leaders nominated and the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman were selected from among them unanimously.

It was only in 1968, elections to village panchayat assumed some competition, conflict between the Okkaliga factions and some deadlock. Yet even in 1968, 10 out of 13 Panchayat members were Okkaligas. Both the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman continued to be Okkaligas. A couple of educated Okkaliga youths managed to get into the Panchayat. But Scheduled Caste members continued to rest with the older generation. Literally Scheduled Caste votes were bought in the elections of the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman. The present Chairman being wealthy, has an economic network including money-lending business, of which local Scheduled Castes can hardly extricate.

The nominal membership of the Scheduled Castes in village Statutory Panchayat has continued. They are still bound to carry out their traditional roles of removing the dead cattle and skinning the animal for their caste Hindu patrons. They live in an exclusive colony at the periphery of the village. They cannot take water or touch the public taps in the village. Thus all the socio-economic disabilities, educational backwardness has continued despite statutory membership in village panchayat. Without strengthening the economic base and redeeming them from the economic dependence, political representation implies no substantial change. In fact in many Panchayats they are kept as 'show-pieces' and the government is satisfied.

In Dhanagalli on the other hand, Scheduled Castes preponderate. That is only adds to problems but not betterment

is substantiated from this village. Out of 786 people constituting 173 households, Adi-Karnataka untouchables are as numerous as 50.4 per cent and own 41.9 per cent of land out of 606 acres. The Lingayats with 20.6 per cent population own 28.1 per cent land and the Families with 24.7 per cent population have 27.2 per cent land. Here the Lingayat minority has always dominated both the Panchayat and the Co-operatives, as the Okkaligas do in Belagola.

Dhanagalli as a 9 village group Panchayat headquarters in 1960 had 20 members of which 3 belonged to Scheduled Castes and had a Lingayat Vice-Chairman. But in 1968 elections as 4 village group Panchayat headquarters, the Panchayat consisted of 13 members of whom 3 were Scheduled Castes. This time both the Chairman and the Vice-Chairman were Lingayats.

The numerical preponderance and even ownership of some land by the Scheduled Castes in this village has hardly made them economically secure or politically powerful. They cannot dream of getting into positions of Chairman and Vice-Chairman in the Panchayat or become President and Secretary of the Co-operatives. These remain the prerogatives of upper castes who have traditionally dominated and continue to dominate under the so-called democratic system.

In fact, more 'news' that local Scheduled Castes were thinking of giving up their traditional role of removing the dead cattle from the caste Hindu patrons' houses had provoked the latter and they made no secret of viewing it seriously and considering the appropriate steps in face of threat which would resolve this problem. Obviously economic sanctions were looming large.

The story of the role of Weaker Sections and Panchayati Raj outlined above from 5-6 village studies in Karnataka suggests that the outcome is not very encouraging. Whether continued experiments in this sphere will lead to desirable changes is highly plausible. Local upper caste people have no interest in government programmes Scheduled Castes' betterment. Village Scheduled Castes are entrenched between



ignorance and mildly hostile villagers. The prize winning model villages for removal of untouchability are anybody's guess. Hoodwinking or by-passing the real problems and issues have become too frequent and common. Cases of Scheduled Caste harassment are given quite different colours where even the government and officials feel helpless. What is the way out? I will substantiate the lack of knowledge of constitutional provisions and the rampant practice of untouchability from yet another ongoing-study in Karnataka.

The socio-economic survey of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Karnataka, is undertaken by the Sociology Department, University of Mysore at the instance of the government. The survey is nearing completion. But the findings are revealing if not startling. For all the propaganda, both public and private, that has been going on at different levels, the position of the majority of Scheduled Castes and Tribes is not an inch better in the villages of the State.

Out of 81 villages selected for survey in the entire State 5 were for intensive study, and the rest covered Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe population only. If the composition of the Village Panchayats and Scheduled Caste representation is examined, the two dominant castes of the State, the Lingayats and Okkaligas seem to have equally divided the spoils between them. For there are 28 Lingayat Chairmen and 25 Vice-Chairmen while among the Okkaligas it is 27 and 23 respectively. There are only 3 Scheduled Caste Chairmen and alone Vice-Chairman. This again could be attributed to exclusive Scheduled Caste villages or where they constituted an overwhelming majority, while no other upper caste was in a position to take up the leadership. There are also instances of villages, where no Scheduled Castes are represented on the Panchayat. A striking case of a village with 42.2 per cent Scheduled Castes in the capital district and quite close to the capital city has not got a Scheduled Caste Panchayat member, while Lingayat Chairman and Okkaliga Vice-Chairman function there.



Where the Scheduled Castes are numerically insignificant, not touched by the constitutional provisions including the knowledge of facilities, remain dependent and subservient to upper castes the room for compassion and helpful attitude of the upper castes could be speculated to continue. Where Scheduled Castes are numerically large and come under the influence of urban and democratic ideas including protective government treatment, more heat and tension are generated and the losers are always Scheduled Castes. They get alienated from local sympathy and help. The Government is not that quick to rush to their rescue. In either case, the lot of the Scheduled Castes as Weaker Sections continue to remain vulnerable because of a number of forces working at cross-purposes.

The village Scheduled Castes (80%) have hardly heard of Scheduled Caste leaders at different levels. Of the much advertised distribution of house sites, building materials, finance, land for cultivation, 90-95 per cent of village Scheduled Castes have not heard, and even where they have, they have not availed. They could not, because the processes and personnel involved are not conducive to serve the purpose. Hardly 12 per cent of Scheduled Castes, can draw water from public wells, while 80 per cent cannot enter temples. The services of the Priest, Barber and Washerman are not available to majority of them.

Given the above conditions, Panchayati Raj cannot bring about substantial improvement in the lot of the weaker sections. How can the Panchayat Chairman coming from an upper caste with sound socio-economic background, treat a Scheduled Caste panchayat member who presumably works as an agricultural servant, on a footing of equality? Now is he in a position to initiate changes and bring about modifications in the traditional attitudes of low and high, pure and impure. Obviously there is need to search for agents of change elsewhere.

Special concessions and treatment, of late, is breeding lot of ill-will, leading to tension between Scheduled Castes and non-Scheduled Castes on the one hand, while some times the

non-SCs pass off as Scheduled Castes and avail these privileges successfully. In either case the SCs are put to lot of trouble and their aspirations could not be achieved.

The current policies of the government to give sites, houses and land ownership to weaker sections, if it is at the cost of upper castes it will lead to more hatred and tension. The government cannot stand by the village SCs constantly and protect them from the wrath of vested interests. Such concessions availed in the past have been successfully alienated. It is not only the greedy upper castes that need to be blamed. The scheming, the unfortunate and lazy SCs partly share the blame. So the problems of poverty remain at the starting point as ever.

A little change in the government policy and a shift of emphasis will go a long way in ensuring both finding a solution to the problem, stopping all alienation, fragmentation and sub-division, ensuring security including physical security. Instead of giving ownership rights to the weaker sections, I suggest that these people are given usufructuary rights while ownership rests with the government itself. Fundamental rights to property need not be sacrosanct. This when applied to sites, houses and land will check sub-division, fragmentation and alienation and ensures minimum security, food and shelter. Even when land is taken from surplus holders, if the rights are vested with government a weaker section person who may be cultivating it will not be singled out to seek vengeance.

Alternatively establishment of agricultural communes with agro-industries and marketing complex, where landless people inclined to engage in cultivation may be involved. All landless persons cannot be given land nor it is necessary to assume them to become cultivators. Economic diversification is necessary. The need-based, work-point, share in the produce, if necessary under government supervision will go a long way in finding a solution to the problem. These should cut-across caste and religious groupings. No single caste or religious group should be concentrated because it amounts to segregation. Segregation of any kind, special treatment and status will perpetuate the problems rather than solve them.



Above all, universal education, a rationale for assistance to all categories of students, may help to bring about change in attitudes and values. The present backward classes tag has undoubtedly become a most notorious scheme, where practically everyone can somehow seek and find a berth.

The socio-economic programmes should have village based and not town or city based. Even urbanization and industrialisation may not bring about speedy solution to the problem. What is needed is structural changes and not reform by appeasing the appetite of a few vocal men from all caste groups.

Caste will not die a natural death. It has to be given a ceremonial burial and not construed as a political weapon pressure group in a democracy. All the well-intentioned welfare policies have dual edges. These are and can be exploited by a few to the detriment of many. The success of democracy does not revolve around the success of a political party to rule unhindered.

Social justice and not distributive justice whereby a few favours are shown to the vocal that will solve the problems of poverty, illiteracy, untouchability, improve the position of women. Whether social democracy or political democracy that should precede remains an intriguing complex issue.



## AMBEDKAR'S ANALYSIS OF HINDU SOCIAL ORDER

Never before in Indian history, the need to understand and assess the writings of Dr. Ambedkar was felt more urgent and imperative than the present decade, forty-two years after Indian independence and thirty-nine years of democratic sovereign, socialist, secular republic, which profess to do away with caste and class differences and assures social and economic justice to all.

The present study admittedly dealing from a sociological view point amidst a gathering consisting largely of political scientists is both interesting and challenging.

My task is simplified, since I am assigned to present Ambedkar's analysis of the Hindu social order. Even as I agreed to do it, I know my limitations and responsibilities. I will attempt an analysis of Ambedkar's analysis of Hindu social order. This enables me to highlight the salient features, almost eternal truth and where necessary I will add additional information including my view point in support or as a point of departure from that of Ambedkar's.

Ambedkar wrote on many subjects and with authority. His intellectual and academic achievements are the legacies which

he has left behind coming from an untouchable group which was traditionally denied all access to knowledge (Keer : 1962). It is his formal education, world travel, coupled with personal experience and the Indian independence movement spearheaded by the Congress leaders drawn from top caste groups that provided ample opportunity to Dr. Ambedkar to reflect on the Hindu social organization.

Ambedkar happily was a student of Sociology at Columbia University, U.S.A., during the second decade of the 20th century. Sociology and Anthropology as understood at the turn of the 20th century were still making a beginning and were largely under the spell of evolutionary theory, pre-occupied with seeking explanation of the origin of social institutions and customs (Brown: 1952). The search for origins, unless it is well supported by either documented historical records or similar archaeological evidence could prove highly vulnerable and often lend itself to speculation. Speculation is neither history nor science and it can do damage to both.

There were built in limitations in the prevailing social theories and the academic training which Dr. Ambedkar received as is true of all people, at all times. As far as posterity is concerned that some of the views held by Ambedkar then may seem untenable to-day, particularly in the light of available empirical data. This gives an edge over Ambedkar's views and analysis.

Ambedkar wrote on Hindu social organization, more specifically on caste system in his works; 'Origin and Mechanism of the Caste' and the 'Annihilation of Caste' the former, originally was a seminar paper presented in 1916 at Columbia University, Department of Anthropology, the latter the undelivered presidential speech printed in connection with the *Jat Pat Todak Mandal*, Lahore in 1936.

The other two books: 'Who Were the Shudras (1946)', 'Who Were the Untouchables (1948)' try to throw light on the origin of the Sudras and Untouchables in the Hindu society.

For purposes of this study, I confine myself to the first



two works, though Ambedkar throughout his life was engaged in exposing the evil effects of the Hindu social system.

Ambedkar's distinction between the *Varna* and Caste is valid. *Varna* is a broad occupational grouping which preceded the caste system. Accordingly the Brahmans, Kshatriyas, the Vyshyas and the Sudras, constituted the priestly, military, merchant and the artisan and menial class respectively. It was an open system based on aptitude and worth, so that people could move into and move out of one or the other *varna*.

In contrast, caste system as it developed became a closed system based on birth. As time passed on, the caste rules were systematized, codified and philosophised in the writings of law-givers, particularly in the hands of Manu. Manu dharma Shashtra deals with rules regulating Hindu social life. *Varna dharma*, *jati dharma* became all pervasive.

In the seminar Dr. Ambedkar examines the theories of caste put forth by earlier writers such as Senart, Nesfield, Sir H. Risley and Dr. Ketkar. 'Ideal of Pollution', restriction on interdining and inter-marriage, caste membership based on birth, facts advocated as central to caste system, are subjected to critical assessment by Ambedkar. The idea of pollution, according to Ambedkar is not necessarily connected with caste. Rather it originates in priestly ceremonialism, which enjoys the highest rank in caste system. 'Priest and purity are old associates'.

The notions of ritual, purity and pollution, however, cannot be dismissed so lightly as has been done by Ambedkar. The idea of pollution is one of the attributes of caste system and to-day there is enough material to substantiate the pervasiveness of the idea in almost all walks of life and is not just religious in character. Notions of ritual purity and pollution are associated with occupations. Occupational attribute as a form of division of labour, presents a graded hierarchy both in ancient and modern times. Occupations which carry higher status and rank are usually pursued by upper castes and these have least association with ritual pollution. The white collar



as distinct from blue collar workers, are inadequate concepts to fully convey the notions of ritual purity and pollution.

In a general sense, all manual work is looked down upon and some of the occupations are singled out by Manu as degrading. Butchery, toddy tapping, scavenging, leather work and so forth. The entire social stigma which is the brunt of the burden attached to untouchables in India, stems from the inherent nature of occupational attributes. In fact, caste and occupation in some cases have become synonymous over the years. With or without following the caste occupation of leather work, a *chamar* is a *chamar* and so he is treated as a source of ritual pollution.

The unseeable, unapproachable and the untouchables are the categories of people who occupy the extreme bottom in Hindu social organization. Though they rendered essential and useful services, they suffered from eternal stigma. The "pollution barrier", as is understood, demarcates these groups from all others in the Hindu fold. Nothing can purify them, though others who are polluted by their touch can get themselves purified by taking a purification bath.

I will cut short to suggest that notions of ritual pollution underlie, the vegetarian and non-vegetarian food diction. Meals, cloth and many more mundane things of life are governed by these notions. Whatever changes are visible to-day under the impact of modernizing forces, the purity of the Brahmin and pollution of the untouchables are substantially intact.

Restrictions on commensal and connubial relationships also indicate maintenance of purity by accepting food and drink and marrying from one's own caste or castes which are on par but not from castes which rank lower.

Ambedkar next goes on to discuss how endogamy and exogamy, the principles which regulate marriage as most crucial to understand caste system: "the super-imposition of endogamy on exogamy means the creation of caste" is an observation which is elaborately dealt with.

Endogamy is not just a caste phenomenon but as we know from available sources, it is a universal practice. It is found in class structure, ancient and modern royal families and nobility, including religion. A Roman Catholic or a Sheik among Muslims are required to marry within the appropriate group. The rules of exogamy—the Hindu *gotras*, or tribal clans trace their descent from some mythical being and men and women born in the same *gotra* are classed as brothers and sisters. Hence *sagotra* marriages are taboo and would amount to incest relationship. The several totemic objects—which constitute *Bedagu* among non-Brahmins or members of a caste or sub-caste owing allegiance to a common *math-head* as among the Lingayats, can be said to be an extension of the principle of marriage restrictions, i.e., exogamy.

Caste system has shown an endless tenacity for fission and growth. Each caste group consists of hundreds and thousands of sub-castes. The Brahmins as a *varna* include within itself Brahmins representing several sub-castes and sub sub-castes based on minute differences.

Rules of marriages, like the rules of game are indeed elaborate in all societies. Caste endogamy has been a regular feature, though exceptions are provided in *Manu Smriti* itself. *Manu* speaks of *anuloma* and *pratiloma* marriages which by definition should take place across caste groups. In *Anuloma*—Hypergamy—upper caste man can marry lower caste woman. A Brahmin can have a wife from all the four *varnas*, but the status, rank and property share of offsprings went in decreasing order from Brahman to Sudra. In *Pratiloma*—hypogamy marriage—upper caste woman married a lower caste man. The woman lost her status and rank and most often was excommunicated.

The mention of these two types of disapproved marriages has provided a latitude in Indian society for legalizing polygamous as well as extra-marital permissiveness. *Kulinism* of Bengal-Kulin Brahmin men contracting polygamous marriages across the castes is one of the best examples of *anuloma*. Men did not lost their caste status by cohabiting with women of any caste especially lower castes, while women did lose. The



extension of the domain of upper caste men's access to lower caste women underlie the 'devadasi' system and to this day in North India Scheduled Caste chamar-married girls are first deflowered by upper caste Jats, Yadavas and other before they join their husbands. Thus the monotony of caste endogamy is occasionally broken by hypergamous and hypogamous, legal and extra marital sex unions. Since these are built into the system, however, few and far between they side track caste endogamy.

The stand taken by Ambedkar, linking caste with endogamy, "the problem of caste, then ultimately resolves itself into one of repairing the disparity between the marriageable units of the two sexes within it" leads him to examine further certain devices which were developed in Hindu society to regulate marriage.

The custom of sati, burning the woman on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, was developed among Hindus, in addition to enforced widowhood. Likewise a widower could remain celibate for the rest of life or could get married to young not yet marriageable bride, which in other words means child marriage.

Ambedkar exhibits great skill to tally the sex ratio of his theory of surplus man and woman and finally hits upon sati, enforced widowhood and child marriage as devices that perpetuated endogamy and caste.

The practice of sati was not as widespread as Ambedkar imagined. It was commonly observed among the Rajputs and those with marital tradition. The warring chiefdoms usually considered woman also as one of the booties. If men died in action, their wives were taken away by the conquerors, as concubines, slaves and so forth. Since marriage is considered sacred and a woman's chastity unquestioned, the practice of sati provided solution.

As the custom of *sati* got linked with property rights of woman—according to *Dayabhaga* law in Bengal, upper caste began to abuse it and force the widow to mount the funeral



pyre of her dead husband. This was realised by social reformers in Bengal. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others worked relentlessly for its abolition.

The custom of sati, connected as it was to either marital tradition or propertied groups, was limited to upper castes—Kshatriyas, perhaps Brahmins but was never universal.

Enforced widowhood, in a man-made world, which considered marriage as sacred and emphasized a woman's pre- and post-marital chastity as crucial for purposes of social status, rank and above all purity of stock could be considered as possible causes. Both in patrilineal as well as matrilineal societies, woman's sex rights are jealously guarded. Only virgin marriage is considered and carries prestige. A remarriage is fraught with difficulty and definitely such woman has lower status. A widow and a divorcee seeking remarriage suffer loss of personal phenomenon. In the Indian context enforced widowhood followed by dress restrictions and other physical disfiguring was again restricted to upper caste Brahmins. Widows belonging to lower castes could always get married-kudavali—as is commonly known.

Junior levirate or 'niyoga' union when the younger brother of the deceased man can inherit and raise issues on the widow is a recognized form of sex relationship mentioned by Manu. Thus both *sati* and widowhood have their roots elsewhere than in merely meeting the rules of endogamy.

Child marriage is not necessarily a widower getting married to a young girl. The idea of protecting woman against temptations, safeguarding her chastity, name and fame status of the family is marry her off as soon as possible. Many enjoins universal and possibly pre-puberty marriages for girls. How widespread and among which castes this was, is a pertinent question. Historically during the Muslim period child marriage as well as *purdha* received a spurt among Hindus to protect girls from the evil eyes of the Muslim rulers as also to avoid forcible conversion. This could be applicable mostly to upper castes. While upper castes to-day have nearly abandoned the

practice, lower castes are in for child marriage despite the law against child marriage. Both boys and girls were/are married while still young Ambedkar's first marriage itself is a case in point.

"In a way, the status of a caste in the Hindu society varies directly with the extent of the observance of the customs of *sati*, enforced widowhood and girl marriage. Those castes that are nearest to the Brahmins have imitated all the three customs and insist on the strict observance thereof; those that are less near have imitated enforced widowhood and girl marriage; others, a little further off, have only girl marriage and those furthest off have imitated only the belief in the caste principle."

The above conclusions based on the law of imitation drawn by Ambedkar and the process of sanskritization, non-Brahmins systematically 'aping' the Brahmins seem to share much in common but with a fundamental difference. For Ambedkar the Brahmins are the villains, but for Srinivas, they are the personification of all the best—the superb group.

I will steer clear of both these versions. Different groups put in a structural context of hierarchical layers, however, did have inter-caste contacts of various kinds at different levels. The economic relationships, ritual interdependence of varying degrees, the services of willing Brahmin priests which was usually available to the strong and the rich readily provided myths of origin, invented gotras, investing *sacred* thread to non-brahmins as well. Functional interdependence amongst groups, coupled with the role of the Brahmin may be said to have provided a basis for the differential spread and sharing of common values, customs and practices.

The Brahmins being minority group throughout the ages could not but stage-manage for their mere survival by remaining an exclusive group and safeguarding their secular position by cornering all knowledge to themselves, behaving and acting as god's chosen men—as gods on earth.

Ambedkar's explanation of the fissiparous character of caste, ability for self-duplication, violation of caste rules lead-



ing to excommunication and formation of a new caste is only a part of the story which Manu himself recognized. Attempts to climb up the social ladder are made by several non-Brahmins, especially lower castes. Barring the Veerasaiva movement which asserted equality with Brahmins, every other movement, has invariably claimed a social position next to Brahmins. Many of them except for the untouchables have tried and succeeded in passing off as Kshatriyas. In this process the 'forward' looking group as distinct from the group maintaining *status quo*, would break off its social relationships with the latter and begin differentiating. Once this is crystallized, the sub-castes of a caste tend to become independent entities. Multiplication of caste could also trace to conscious efforts made by groups for upward social mobility, e.g., the Boad and Ganjam distillers in F.G. Bailey's study (1958).

In his Presidential Address to *Jat Pat Todak Mandal*, Ambedkar touches upon many vital points. Many of the empirical studies are effectively available only after 1950's. If some of the views of Ambedkar are criticised it is because of the new light thrown by empirical studies in recent years. If these sources were available to him, perhaps Ambedkar would not have projected some of the points as he had done. Accordingly, caste is not a mere division of labour, but it is also a division of labourers in an hierarchy grading one above the other, contrary to natural aptitudes. Caste occupation or hereditary occupations based on the dogma of pre-destination jettisons individual sentiments and preference and is identified as a direct cause of much of the unemployment in the country.

Hereditary occupation did not always give economic security to castes, e.g., the services of a carpenter or blacksmith. There has been considerable occupational diversification with pax Britanica and western education. New occupations and professions have emerged. But occupational attributes especially those associated with low castes, carry low values and social stigma. In some cases castes names are synonymous with occupation. Here even when traditional occupation is never followed by persons, they



are in fact identified with occupation and low status. The Chamar—leather worker—and Jagjivan Ram is a classic case. Scavenging, butchery, dealing in alcohol, carry low status and stigma.

Before I proceed further, I would like to recall that between 1916 and 1936, Ambedkar had many traumatic experiences both in personal as well as public life. The 1916 seminar paper has an academic edge: the 1936 Presidential address is a public speech interspersed with academic points here and there. By and large, the interval between the two could be treated as a ruminating period. His experience of caste discrimination, organization of Scheduled Caste Federation (SCF), emergence of Ambedkar as a spokesman of India's untouchables, his attendance at the London Round Table Conferences, Communal Award and the coercive Poona Pact, thrust on him to save the life of Mahatma who went on fast unto death against the Communal Award—all these events have to be treated as background material to understand why Ambedkar wrote the way he has and why he published it when the Conference itself was cancelled by the organizers.

Ambedkar was not an angry young man in 1936. He had emerged as a champion of the millions of untouchables and was a leader in his own right. Though controversial, his views are well founded but in some cases, they are less academic and more populist. He is emotionally charged against the social evils perpetuated by Brahmanical Hinduism and the caste system. He sees a close connection between Hinduism and caste stratification. Coming as he did from Mahar untouchables group, he knew only too well where the shoe pinches; the untouchable *vis-a-vis* caste Hindu relations.

Caste system and Hindu religion are so intimately interwoven, it is very difficult to identify where religion begins and caste ends or *vice-versa*. The social gradation with differential rights and privileges makes it impossible to organize a common front against the caste system. He says breaking up of caste amongst the Hindus is well nigh impossible. At any rate it would take ages before a breach is made.

Ambedkar further says that the intellectual class in every country is the most influential group that can foresee, advise and lead. The entire destiny of a country depends upon its intellectual class. The Brahmins as the intellectual and priestly class have spoiled Hinduism. Only a casteless Hindu society can have the internal strength. So he argues for the destruction of all the sacred literature—*Vedas, puranas, shastras, smriti* and *sruti*—and advocates the abolition of priesthood and finally destruction of Hinduism itself. To him Hindu religion is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions, dealing with rules rather than principles.

Ambedkar cannot be accused of making sweeping statements. Only some of the remedies suggested by him are unrealistic. The intellectual heritage in this country has not given lead or shaped the destiny of the country. If they have done it, they have done it in a wrong and inhuman way. Hoarding of knowledge from fellow men and keeping the bulk of people illiterate has been a predominant feature of Brahmanical Hinduism. This had its adverse effects both on the country and its people. From adviser to administration is a glory tale which is perpetuated down the ages and Brahmanical Hinduism can be seen playing the cards in its favour though it is highly imperceptible.

The Brahmanical values have percolated down the ages and places, so that Karma, Dharma, fear of the unknown, and many superstitions have gripped the masses of people who remain ignorant and illiterate even to this day. The exigencies might have prompted many Brahmins today to secularise, to give up priesthood, study of *Vedas, shastras* and *puranas* and develop 'abrahmanical' values for themselves. This new trend has not taken roots. The bulk of people scattered in the villages cannot easily escape from the traditional values, because these have come to symbolise the essence of life.

Traditionally the services of the Brahmin priest were not available to all, although now a Brahmin priest may willingly serve non-Brahmins. In fact over the centuries, priesthood has spread among all castes and sub-castes even among



untouchables. The snobberies of the priestly class whether it be Brahmins, Jangamas or others, exploitation of the religious susceptibilities of the masses seems to be a worldwide phenomenon including Islam and Christianity.

Abolition of Hinduism, priesthood and all sacred literature is a wishful thinking. New set of values have to be deliberately created and floated. The institutional and personal aspects of religion have to be treated as independent entities. The spiritual or other aspirations may induce a person to be religious. But religion as an organized institution in almost all societies is also a powerful informal agent of social control. It is this aspect of Hinduism which needs to be condemned, destroyed or set right.

The religious values enter and colour all secular activities which is vitiating and the cumulative effect has been very unfortunate. If you say you are a Hindu, what kind of Hindu-caste membership? legitimately follows. This does not necessarily follow in Islam, Christianity though, in their own surroundings in the Indian context, preconversion caste status by and large is kept alive nearly by all for purposes of social intercourse. It is not sacred or religiously consecrated according to Ambedkar.

Several rebellious and reformist movements down the countries have seldom challenged the supremacy of the Brahmin and Brahmanical values, with the exception of Veerasaivism. People aspiring for social mobility through change of religion in the Indian context needed the blessings of the Brahmin priest and it is he who legitimized the social status of the new group which stood below him and not at par. Where groups tried to challenge the Brahmin and aspired for equal status, it has been a miserable failure as in the case of Viswakarma and lead to the creation of a parallel structure as in the case of Veerasaivas imbibing many of the Brahmanical values, though Basava condemned many of these values.

The pliability of Hinduism is notorious. It includes extreme opposites--a pure-Brahmin, an impure untouchable--



contrary and contradictory views, values and practices. All the protest and reform movements have been happily accommodated as the joint family members of Hinduism. It can absorb all the shocks and go out as a most tolerant but equally hideous faith. Who is a Hindu? What makes a man a Hindu? have come to symbolise and revolve around caste system, and not really on the ethical, moral or spiritual moorings.

Ambedkar does deal elaborately on their aspects of Hindu social organization. He tore both caste system and Hinduism into bits and pieces from all possible angles. To him caste does not result in economic and is responsible for unemployment. Fortunately economic diversification has nearly jettisoned the association of caste with occupation except in a few low status occupations. But no caste at any time has survived by following only traditional occupations. People have always supplemented their income by following other occupations.

Dr. Ambedkar says that the higher caste Hindus have deliberately prevented the lower castes who are within the pale of Hinduism from rising to cultural level of the higher castes. This is contrary to the stand taken by him earlier when he says that in spite of the composite make up of the Hindu population, there is a deep cultural unity and caste is a parcelling into bits of a large cultural unit.

Ambedkar deals at length with the efforts of Arya Samaj and criticises the stand taken by the Samaj of going back to Vedas and organizing the Hindu society on *Chaturvarna* principles based on guna and not birth. He outlines the practical difficulties and says that *varna* and caste are fundamentally different and opposed to each other. He concludes that there cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than *Chaturvarna*. "It is the system which deadens, paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity." To him education and means of defence are paramount requirements of every man for his self-preservation unlike the prerogative of only the Brahmins and Kshatriyas in the *Chaturvarna* social order.

The genuine Kshatriyas must have vanished long time back as observed by K.M. Panikkar. Historically many Sudra groups, given the numerical strength and marital tradition have passed for Kshatriyas. The Brahmin priests invented myths of noble origin, consecrated them and legitimized their social position below the Brahmins. The rise of Shivaji, the Maratha ruler, the Lingayat Rajas of Coorg and many other petty rulers, and the Coorgs themselves in modern times provide examples. Kshatriya *varna* is perhaps the only *varna* which has received and includes within its fold the most diverse groups aspiring for social mobility. Brahmins as priests and court advisers could usually make the rulers to comply with their views.

He further highlights the problems associated with conversion. "Caste is inconsistent with conversion. Inculcation of beliefs and dogmas is not the only problem that is involved in conversion. To find a place for the convert in the community is another and a much more important problem." After having pointed out the drawbacks of the 'Shuddhi' movement—reclaiming converts to Hindu fold—launched by Arya Samaj, he observes that both 'Shuddhi' and 'Sanghatan' are impossible for Hindus, as they have no consciousness of kind.

In the same breath, Ambedkar announced his decision to quit Hinduism and the speech as being his last as a Hindu. He took yet another two decades to put it into action. Knowing the pros and cons of conversion, having made constitutional safeguards to Hindu untouchables, he staked the future of lakhs of untouchable converts to Buddhism. By then he had his second albeit a Brahmin wife. All the rationality and morality which is attributed to Buddhism cannot solve the earthly problems of the converts. If they attain *nirvana*, it is presumably only after death. Buddhism lacks vigour. How far the word Buddhist society can assimilate India's neo-Buddhists? The uncertainty and nebulousness have rendered the lives of the neo-Buddhists much more vulnerable. Staying in rural areas, their place of origin, being economically dependent on caste Hindus, militates



against their claims to social equality. In fact much of the conflict that has ensued since, is not because of religious differences but secular interests involving scarce resources.

Historically religion is abused for all and sundry. It has been made to serve as the handmaid of politics. If conversion cannot resolve caste differences, why Ambedkar should have led a conversion movement even as he provided constitutional safeguards to strengthen the economic and educational background of Scheduled Castes? The strange new forms and roles, which caste can assume under democracy makes religious conversion a non-sense, unless it is used as political weapon to reach a bargaining position. Even Buddhism as an organized religion has got its limitations. At the 'fag end' of his life, Ambedkar fell a victim to conversion. The way the neo-Buddhists have tried to deify Ambedkar and put him on par with Buddha, while Buddha himself is described as the tenth *avatar* by Hindus, makes the whole issue more complicated. Since Buddhist converts are mostly drawn from mahar sub-caste, which has a marital tradition, it would be appropriate to give them Kshatriya status. For the Jatavas chamar sub-caste of Agra, even as some of them have embraced Buddhism have floated a myth of Kshatriya origin. (Lynch: 1969).

Conversion can give mental peace or mental torture depending on the issues at stake. To give religion such an exalted place in a sense is to perpetuate the same old values, Ambedkar believed and put forth the origin of Buddhism to untouchable followers. Instead he should have risen above religious susceptibility, given thought to a set of new values and ideology to combat against the deadwood in Hinduism. There is no compulsion in Hinduism to attend a temple or to invite a priest. It is both an unorganised and disorganised lot. There is no single centralised religious authority. This is a great advantage to bypass Hinduism and concentrate on secular issues. What we need is replacement of old worn out values by new one's with added emphasis on human dignity, justice and equality.



Ambedkar also advised the Hindus to think "what kind of religion and morality have enabled men to flourish, to go strong, to people the earth and to have dominion over it." Though he has not spelt out which of the living or dead world religions come nearer to his expressions, one could suspect that he probably already had Buddhism in his mind as it became apparent in the 1948 publication and embracing of the faith by him in 1956. The above description could also be viewed that as though Ambedkar was in search of a militant faith, which I am less inclined to speculate.

Hinduism has not remained static is clear from the number of reform movements including religious conversion. Each one of them brought in their wake a series of changes which need not be viewed as progressive. To expect an agent of social control (religion) to play the role of an agent of social change is like crying for the moon !

Dr. Ambedkar considered how a substitute to caste can be brought about in Hindu social organization, after having considered minute details from all possible angles at last hits upon the idea of inter-caste marriage as a remedy. "The real remedy for breaking caste is inter-marriage. Nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste." He elaborates further how inter-marriage brings about fusion of blood, which alone can create the feelings of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindered becomes paramount, the separatist feeling of kinship, of being kindered becomes paramount, the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by caste will not vanish.

He argues that "to agitate for and to organize inter-caste dinners, and inter-caste marriages (admittedly by voluntary efforts of reform movements) is like forced feeding brought about by artificial means." He further suggests ways and means of overcoming it. He said "make every man and woman free from the thralldom of the shastras, cleanse their minds of the pernicious notions founded on the shastras, and he or she will inter-dine and inter-marry, without your telling him or her to do so."

By advocating inter-caste marriage as a real remedy for breaking down caste system, Dr. Ambedkar has raised a hornet's nest. As a step to achieve this, he suggests freeing the minds of men and women from the grip of the shastras.

I agree that inter-caste marriage may be one of the remedies but not a final solution to caste system. Who should train men and women to rid them of the grip of shastras? Marriages are made in heaven; a Hindu marriage is sacred; cannot be broken during life time though death can separate; are bookish ideas. But in actual practice, the bulk of non-Brahmin marriages are not governed by Brahmanical values. '*Saptapadi*', the seven steps which are taken by the couple walking around *Agni* swearing fidelity is the crowning aspects of the sanctity of Hindu marriage. Barring Brahmins and a few others, eight per cent of Indian marriages get concluded without a *Saptapadi*. To this extent the sanctity attached to marriages, as being made in heaven do not govern the lives of men and women. Separation, divorce both formal and informal have always characterized in, however, small measures it may be, marriages among non-Brahmins or Sudras, who in fact have always constituted a vast majority, around ninety per cent of Hindu population.

The patrilineal family organization, where authority vests in eldest male member, demands respect and obedience from children and wife. In this superordination-sub-ordination relationship, the juniors have only duties and not much of rights. The children have to obey parents, show deference to their wishes, and the parents are the custodians who look after the children, decide their future, arrange marriages and so it goes in a cycle.

In a world of arranged marriages, where Hindu youths have little freedom, but to agree with elder's choice, how can we imagine the older people bringing brides or giving girls across the castes? It is not so much the pernicious notions let loose by Hindu shastras, but practical problems that govern the marriage. I am tempted to characterise that Hindus never grow up—they remain juvenile dependents—from



generation to generation on many counts. The grand father—father—son, all being successively dependent and vital decisions about one's life or future being taken by the other elders.

The sense of dependence, including economic dependence, property rights, education, all are governed by the authority vested in males in partilineal family. Given this situation, where does the shastras figure? For majority of young men and women in rural areas have known only elders control and their decision as binding and presumably have not heard of any shastras. The family structure, the authority and rights as long as they continue in the same way, it is an uphill task for the younger generation to embark upon inter-caste marriage. Men and women who are educated and are gainfully employed and freed themselves from utter economic dependence, quite often find it difficult to assert themselves in areas where their lives and future is involved. In fact over the years, the educated men have become a marketable commodity available to the highest bidder—who pays dowry.

I remember a young political science graduate with a secure job toying with the idea of inter-caste marriage finally settled down to appropriately arranged marriage. His conclusions and explanations though may sound strange, but should be valid in hundreds and thousands of cases. Only orphans can entertain inter-caste marriage! In addition to economic issues, there are several other fetters which bind men and women. Name and fame of family, neighbourhood, kinsman, future of the children—all these and many more intricate problems crop up. Men who showed guts as adventurers, marrying western girls—or otherwise upon their return to India have got their own castefold. Veerasaiva mutts can be credited with this social service in the recent past.

There is a great need to free the Indian youth from the pernicious control exercised by the family elders, provide them with liberal education, employment opportunities and spatial mobility. There certainly are instances of successful inter-caste marriages—sometimes self-contracted or even grudgingly



arranged or approved by elders. But they are not in sufficient numbers. Also human susceptibilities and desires, even when the parents are married inter-caste—a Brahmin, non-Brahmin—the non-Brahmin wife, would feel proud to publicly announce how their daughter is getting married to a Brahmin boy !

Caste is ubiquitous and it has a long history. There is no single solution to all the social problems created by this institution. Under democracy, it has become much more rampant. In fact political democracy has unleashed sets of new problems rooted in caste sentiments. It is an affront to Dr. Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, which starts with a pious hope of casteless, classless society on the one hand and on the other, the atrocities let loose on untouchables by caste Hindus, as a deterrent measure to check growing awareness among the former in the light of constitutional safeguards.

Ambedkar's soul will turn in the grave and realise that nothing succeeds against caste system and evils perpetrated will multiply. The social milieu and political superstructure are in a sense not at loggerheads. The political system is trying to adjust to the existing social order. Both are graded hierarchies. The structural constraints are genuine hurdles for scheduled caste-ex-untouchable-politicians in the party in power.

The politics of violence is likely to continue and will be directed more and more towards the weaker sections. So far the right to vote has not enabled them to organize. In fact, SC votes are bought for a song. As and when they realise the strength of their votes and organize, there will be more atrocities and mass murders. The government propaganda feeds the anti-reservation feelings. The lukewarm and casual response by government machinery for atrocities perpetrated against Scheduled Castes is a natural corollary of increased caste consciousness. If the numbers are reduced, the problems will be automatically reduced, seems to be a logical conclusion.

I am not a doomsday prophet. Social solutions have to be found for social problems. Constitutional abolition of untouchability is a farce. Untouchability cannot exist without caste

and Hinduism or the latter features inherited by faiths banking on conversion. Why caste and religion should figure so much in all walks of public and private life is a pertinent question. The solution is not immediately in sight. But it should not be assumed that there is no solution at all.

Universal education up to the end of secondary schools, industrialization and urbanization, delinking and banning of all castes and religion from public life, bringing all caste and religious educational institutions under government control could be tried as measures. The voluntary organizations and religious centres of all kind should enlarge the scope of their activities and cease to cater to narrow sectarian needs. The youth organizations should take to constructive and creative activity among the poorer and weaker sections. Mere negative criticism of religious heads of caste organizations will hardly achieve anything fruitful. Sustained efforts to create and spread new and more secular values and humanitarian outlook should be taken up not merely as a challenge, but on a war footing. In this process, if it is necessary a new ideological orientation should be attempted. The politics of caste, and politicians playing hand-in-glove with caste and religious organizations should be checked and publicly condemned.

## 9

### AMBEDKAR AND AFTER : THE POSITION AND FUTURE OF SCHEDULED CASTE MASSES AND CLASSES

'Parliamentary democracy in standing out as protagonist of liberty has continuously added to the economic wrongs of the poor, the downtrodden and the disinherited class. Political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy.' (Ambedkar)

In this chapter I propose to deal in brief the case of Scheduled Castes and the political leaders particularly in the light of constitutional guarantees. The quotation from Ambedkar, the father of Indian Constitution continues to be painfully appropriate even to-day. As the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, Ambedkar was aware how parliamentary democracy cannot provide the panacea for all the social ills of Indian society. By mere political democracy the lot of the Indian untouchables could not become better. Yet he was forced to reconcile his earlier stand as the spokesman of untouchables by providing constitutional measures to protect them from social and religious degradation, economic, educational and political backwardness.

India to-day is a sovereign democratic republic with a Parliament vested with the highest legislative powers in the



land. It is also secular in character. Here I am, however, concerned mostly with an analysis of facts relating to constitutional guarantees to Scheduled Castes. In this context it is important to bear in mind that Scheduled Castes are at variance with 'untouchables' or Harijans although quite often these terms are used interchangeably. Listing certain castes in a schedule for purposes of preferential treatment may or may not involve problems pertaining to untouchability but to social, economic, educational and political backwardness.

Economic, educational and political backwardness can be found in a cross-section of Indian people of all strata, *i.e.*, both high and low castes. The framers of the constitution visualized and used these as the means by which alone they thought the position of the lower castes could be improved. By strengthening the secular base, it was believed that an assault could be mounted in due course on social and religious discrimination and the disparity could be reduced to make the country safe for democracy.

Over the years it looks as though the economic, educational and political backwardness has become an end in itself. Today every section of the Indian people advance some kind of backwardness to plead and claim special care and protection from the government. The ramifications of backwardness on the basis of population, caste, culture, religion, language, region and occupation, are only a few to mention. One wonders why the entire sub-continent and its people could not be declared backward! It is no exaggeration that today no caste group is in a mood to admit that they constitute an advanced section of the population. Backwardness has become a symbol, and an ideal to cherish to reach a bargaining position for privileges. Probably the original implication of constitutional protection has lost much of its relevance.

The constitutional guarantees provided for the Scheduled Castes as a result of the increasing claims for backwardness and the swelling in their numbers, have not only been watered-down but many inroads have been made. Many otherwise socially advanced caste groups have pressurised and succeeded

in getting included in the Schedule so that they can derive economic, educational and political benefits. Here I am not inclined to enumerate all such cases but only interested in pointing out the extent to which the problems of 'untouchables' have got mixed up and lost sight of. For today a genuine upper caste person who mentally equates the Scheduled Castes with 'untouchables' has begun to feel that the Government have done enough to uplift these people and a time has come that the Government should curtail and eventually stop all concessions to these people. To remain backward has become a virtue rather than a vice. So that preferential treatment encourages, shields and perpetuates backwardness !

There is need to distinguish between economic, educational and political backwardness from social and religious discrimination, in a word, caste barriers, to be able to understand the nature of the problem, means as distinct from ends. Dr. Ambedkar who devoted his entire life for the cause of untouchables cannot be said to have confused between disabilities and backwardness. Disabilities as they operated in the Indian society were and are based on caste, religion and social status, whereas one could remain backward without undergoing the pangs of disabilities. So, while framing the constitution, as chairman, he clearly understood the nature of safeguards that should be built in to remove social disabilities through instituting measures that would be a means.

Accordingly, Ambedkar visualized the means to achieve the goals through reservation of seats and representation of 'untouchables' at different political levels. This he thought would throw open the opportunity to have access to power which under the traditional structure was the monopoly of the upper castes. The juridical sway which the upper castes held against the lower castes especially 'untouchables' are too well known to the caste system. A whole range of disabilities from which the 'untouchables' suffer have resulted in their utter degradation and backwardness. The Indian social structure itself is based on graded hierarchy of status where religious, economic, educational, political and juridical powers increase in the ascend-



ing order thus directly limiting the status of lower castes, while the degree of disabilities and backwardness is in the descending order. They are thinly spread over a whole range of Sudra Castes but greatest concentration obtains with reference to 'untouchables' who fall traditionally outside the *varna* scheme and constitute a class of *Avarna* or *Antyaja*.

To lift the 'untouchables' from such a state of degradation and to bring them on par with the vast majority of Indians was the dream of Ambedkar. Since the vast majority of Indians at any given time are Sudras, the hierarchy and rank distinction among them are not that sharp. Ambedkar's life mission, as can be gleaned from his writings, was to bring about unification of Sudras in general and upliftment of the 'untouchables' to the level of the Sudras so that they can be absorbed in the general stream of Indian life.

Ambedkar was not so much against Brahmins as Brahminism and Brahmanical Hinduism which, in practice, generate a hierarchy of social values and thus degrade a vast majority of Indians to subordinate, inferior and degrading positions, that in spite of the best theological expositions found in sacred scriptures. Ambedkar ruthlessly attacked the inhuman values upheld by Brahmanical Hinduism. He knew too well that Brahminical Hinduism cannot be cured of its basic tenets of 'pure'-'impure', 'high'-'low' distinctions. Historically, Hinduism has not only survived revolutionary and reformist movements both from within and without, but has contaminated them beyond cure and reduced them to accept aspects of Hinduism.

Thus, the model of Indian society for Ambedkar was that of the Sudra society which would be ready to absorb different groups. It is only this group which is mass-based, while the twice-born upper castes and degraded lower castes, the Brahmins and 'untouchables', respectively, really constitute polar opposites and serve as appendages. But in actual practice the upper castes have successfully reduced the Sudras and 'untouchables' as appendages by keeping them ignorant, by interpreting the religious injunctions against the Sudra aspira-



tions and interests. Over the centuries, the Sudras have accepted the superiority of Brahminical Hinduism which has consistently thrown coldwater on their aspirations and insisted on keeping them in subordinate positions. To get over these age-long disabilities, degradation and backwardness, the first step which Ambedkar thought was to improve—if not rid of—the social status of untouchables. Since religious movements have failed to bring about this in a substantial measure, it was thought that this should be attacked from more secular grounds like economic betterment, education and political representation of the downtrodden in the body politic.

Political reservation was intended to give opportunities for development of leadership, which otherwise could not emerge. Provision for educational facilities had twin purposes. Firstly, it would serve as an eye-opener to the persons hailing from low castes so that they can become aware and articulate. The intellectual monopoly of the Brahmin in the field of learning and scholarship which persisted as a closed group would gradually be forced to receive others into the fold. Secondly, by a system of reservations, it was intended to provide them with practical experience, in fields hitherto not open, as also economic security; together, these acting as incentives to initiate further improvement in the conditions of untouchables. Formal education, economic improvement and political representation were conceived to buttress one another and as necessary means to bring about the much desired changes and improvement in the status of untouchables and thus help to eradicate the much degrading practice of 'untouchability' and by absorbing the Scheduled Castes in the general stream of national life.

In pre-independence India, the Indian National Congress and its leaders including Mahatma Gandhi recognized, though belatedly, the need for eradication of untouchability and improvement of conditions of the 'untouchables'. Gandhi, under whose leadership, the country's deliverance from imperial rule was brought about, pinned down his faith to the sanctity of Hinduism. He did not see any thing wrong in Hinduism, therefore, saw no reason for any major operations. Gandhi saw untouchability as an appendage and, therefore, not a

threat, though it was an undesirable practice. That if 'untouchables' could be reformed on the model of Brahmanical Hinduism, automatically, the practice of untouchability would disappear and Hinduism would remain intact as benevolent as ever was his conviction.

It is too well known how Ambedkar held a diametrically opposite view and wanted reform of Hinduism. To him Hinduism, caste and untouchability were inseparable. Untouchability cannot be removed without tackling caste and Hinduism. Yet as the chairman of the constitution-drafting committee he accepted the Gandhian exposition of Hinduism and caste system, but agreed for the constitutional abolition of untouchability as sufficient. He accepted, in principle, the need for reform among 'untouchables'. Further he visualized that the in-built checks and balances as well as provisions for preferential treatment would by degree lead to ease the deplorable conditions of untouchables.

The constitutional provisions in other words are a direct reflection of Gandhian views about untouchables and untouchability. Ambedkar was helpless and cornered by an overwhelming majority in the Constituent Assembly who tacitly upheld the Gandhian interpretation and were prepared only to transform the untouchables from the Hindu standpoint and merge them gradually with other Hindus. He was left with no option but to make constitutional provisions for their betterment. These he knew should be long term measures to bring about any improvement in the conditions of Scheduled Castes. Although these measures were seemingly time-bound when they came into force, one could have safely visualised that these in themselves could not bring about miraculous changes of a malady that has been persisting for thousands of years.

The Gandhian approach, although it succeeded in winning freedom for the country, cannot be said to have helped to settle the internal problems in the country. The deep-rooted problems of untouchability could not be removed by mere constitutional guarantees. The political reservations of the Scheduled Castes to the State Assemblies and Parliament have



nevertheless evoked much response among the Scheduled Caste ranks. Scheduled Caste members were enrolled in the national Congress Party before independence. Now other regional and national political parties also woo and have Scheduled Caste candidates as 'show pieces' in the respective parties.

The Congress being the oldest and well organized party had a natural advantage over other parties. From the very beginning, Scheduled Caste candidates were groomed under the guidance of party leaders and bosses by pledging their loyalty to the party. Since the party bosses of all national and some regional parties are invariably drawn from upper castes, the Scheduled Caste members cannot make themselves felt within the party by being too vocal. They had to remain subordinate in the name of the 'party discipline' which was an appropriate pattern of behaviour traditionally on the part of a low caste person.

With political reservation at all levels including village panchayats, the Scheduled Castes have not been able to produce leaders worth the name to champion the cause of untouchables. The new political opportunities offered through reservation have not really attracted people interested in the uplift of Scheduled Castes. What is visible today is that each political party fulfils the constitutional obligation by sponsoring Scheduled Caste candidates in different elections. Those who get elected on the basis of reservation are not necessarily the ones who willingly pledge themselves to the welfare of the community. There seems to be some incongruence in availing reservation opportunities and then turn their back on the very people for whom or whose benefit the constitutional concessions are meant.

Scheduled Caste politicians have nearly ceased to identify themselves with the cause of Scheduled Castes. Like their caste Hindu brethren in politics, they are interested in enjoying the privileges that power brings. Ministers and MPs who have continued since the time of the constituent assembly have hardly emerged as leaders of the Scheduled Castes. Their immediate interests are all inward looking and they are there

for personal and family prestige, to elevate themselves to become neo-Brahmins. Given the choice, they would be more willing to identify themselves with upper castes, and try to model their life-style after them. In this they do not see any contradiction. They legitimize their behaviour pattern as the most forward or progressive section and therefore, have a right to look down upon the illiterate, unfortunate Scheduled Caste millions grounded to earth in rural India. Their ignorance is exploited today not so much by the caste Hindus as it is by the aspiring Scheduled Caste political mediocres who style themselves as leaders.

They have nearly no contact with the Scheduled Castes or their problems. Yet they use every opportunity on public platforms to talk knowledgeably about the plight of Scheduled Castes. They use this as a banner to promote self-interest. They have shown little inclination to organize the Scheduled Castes or to do some educative and constructive work. In fact their centres of activity are largely towns and metropolitan cities. Poor Scheduled Caste men, if they succeed in approaching them, are often required to see them in their offices.

The divided Congress, and the ruling party in particular, was quick enough to realise the rise of *Sudra* groups in different regions as locally dominant political groups which reaped the benefits for nearly two decades. A change in strategy and policy now widely current is to put these dominant *Sudra* groups in the dock and give preference to various minority groups. In this, the top caste groups get their share as minority, there are religious minorities and Scheduled Castes which are picked up as special groups to combat against the locally dominant groups. In a sense, there is a convergence of the top and the bottom groups, who ideologically constitute polar opposites. This 'marriage of convenience' is successful so long as the middle range castes cannot step up. But by the same token, how can one visualise that the unequal partnership will sustain, and that it will work for the benefit of Scheduled Castes? If the regionally dominant *Sudra* groups



exploited the Scheduled Castes till now, the present alignment is an addition. Only future can tell the consequences of this alignment. The trends are that the gap between the top and bottom cannot be bridged by this convergence for political purposes. The fortunate of the two will grab all the opportunities and leave the other to trail behind as before. What is the way out? Can Scheduled Caste politicians organize themselves into a strong group so that they can be at least in a bargaining position with any other group if not on a footing of equality?

Even as they have developed a passion for power and authority the Scheduled Caste politicians have failed to develop leadership and service-mindedness. Perhaps the replacement of Scheduled Caste members much more frequently works against the emergence of leaders. In some ways this has directly encouraged them to seek their self-interests in lieu of the community welfare. If each Scheduled Caste politician were to take care of the Scheduled Caste problems in his constituency, the need to appoint commissions and committees to go into the nature of the problems after 25 years of independence would have been obviated. Identification of problems and their diagnosis would have facilitated evolving policies and programmes to tackle these. What has happened now is that simply some stop-gap measures have been evolved on an all-India basis which may fail to meet the specific problems of particular regions and sections. There are forward, backward and most backward groups with varying degrees of untouchability among themselves and with reference to others, the forward naturally posing to be infinitely superior to the most backward.

The political reservations so far have helped to enrich a few and mark them off as a class distinct from masses and other classes among Scheduled Castes. It is a vicious circle. Continued political reservation after all may not be a solution to the problems of Scheduled Castes and untouchability. If it is scrapped it may take away perhaps the little initiative and service-mindedness to be found in a few Scheduled Caste

politicians. The few political leaders who are there, even they might become a vanishing tribe. In the event of removal of political reservation, how many Scheduled Caste veterans who are there in politics for decades could really fight and win in the elections? It remains extremely doubtful unless, of course, it is based on communal award of early 1930's. Should we retrace our steps and have recourse to a measure over which a battle royal was fought and Ambedkar was the vanquisher? The courses open are perhaps two. Should the present system of political reservation and representation continue, in spite of declared secularism, make the Scheduled Caste politicians responsible to appraise the government with specific problems and help evolve meaningful policies and programmes. Alternatively something on the basis of communal award as championed earlier by Ambedkar may be given a trial, when there will be increasing competition among different Scheduled Castes and the masses will be able to have a say and sort out the leaders rather than being nose-led by a neo-Brahmin class. In either case it should be time bound. Quick succession of events and actions would help to minimise the existing problems, prevent unnecessary waste of funds and above all would not add class-mass problem that has just set in but is likely to crystallise over a period of time.

The solutions for Scheduled Caste problems are never so simple as it appears from the above discussion. Access to political power is one of the powerful components, but by a system of reservation, separate identity is emphasised and the more ambitious have successfully copied the upper caste life-style to kick the ladder through which they claimed this position. In the absence of effective leadership, political reservation has helped to create and serve classes among Scheduled Castes. It is they who mostly avail the constitutional benefits. Admission to courses of study and scholarship facilities are secured for their children, kith and kin to the neglect of the more deserving.

It is, therefore, necessary to ponder in the light of available facts how best the Scheduled Caste problems could be



tackled satisfactorily without its being permanently tagged on to the nation. Important constitutional provisions and a programme of action are already there. This is with reference to formal education. Undoubtedly it is in this field that some appreciable results have been achieved. By all standards, the number of Scheduled Caste students who are getting formal education has increased in the last two decades. This is precisely because of the several facilities which are made available through scholarships, boarding, lodging, and so forth. Yet this has not reached the bulk of Scheduled Castes staying in villages. There are formidable problems. Poverty, ignorance, illiteracy, lack of knowledge about the existing facilities as also the absence of free compulsory education at the primary and secondary levels act against this programme. It is worth the efforts, time and amount spent on the cause of Scheduled Castes if increased facilities are given in the field of education obviating some of the existing difficulties and further making sure that it will not lead to the growth of a class of educated, frustrated, unemployed and under-employed among the qualified Scheduled Caste persons.

Along with education, it is also necessary to make some provisions for economic security. The greatest concentration of Scheduled Castes obtains in rural parts and a majority of them are landless agricultural labourers. There are some who own little land which is often an uneconomic holding. Certain low status occupations like removal of dead cattle, skinning, leather work, scavenging are traditionally associated with some Scheduled Castes. These occupations do not necessarily bring economic self-sufficiency while they add to lower the status of these groups and make them a source of pollution. Increased occupational mobility can be ushered in only through education and employment opportunities. Agricultural wages should be rationalized and an insurance scheme to protect the labourers should be introduced.

Constitutionally fifteen per cent job reservation is guaranteed. Till now it is not being strictly enforced. While there is already a growing resentment among others who look at the scheme as cutting into their opportunities, in effect

Scheduled Castes have not had their legitimate share in all cadres except perhaps Class IV employment. It is also a fact that only government is the sole employer of the Scheduled Caste candidates. Many successful large scale industries, educational institutions, trade, business and commerce which are in the hands of private bodies seldom consider or have appointed Scheduled Caste persons. Poverty, lack of opportunities, and discrimination have increasingly added to the problems of Scheduled Castes.

What really confronts the masses of Scheduled Castes is the problem of shelter, food, and clothing, the basic necessities of life. It is just too much for any government to tackle such vital problems on a vast scale for any length of time. While provisions for urban and rural housing are envisaged, mixed residential areas can be deliberately planned in cities, and this is just difficult to effect in rural areas. One way of tackling this is to bring about increased urbanization and industrialization. Land reforms, urban property ceiling, income ceiling which are very much in the air for decades and rather seriously contemplated in recent years, it is just doubtful, how these measures will benefit the Scheduled Castes. Mere granting of some land may add to individual difficulties as also lead to loss of production. Cultivation, apart from the knowledge required for operations, pre-supposes ability to invest. How many of the Scheduled Caste persons can afford this? Agricultural co-operatives will not solve this problem. Will not the land distributed among Scheduled Castes change hands? Irksome laws are being circumvented throughout the country. What then is the remedy? Setting up of agricultural communes under expert supervision with need based distribution of work and agricultural produce would easily solve many shortcomings of private ownership. This way self-sufficiency in food can be reached.

Private property is one of the fundamental rights. If it cannot be abrogated, and if the government intends improving the economic conditions of Scheduled Castes by piece-meal land legislation, then at least the surplus land released through



legislation should cease to be owned privately. Any private ownership of this category of land, will mean only fragmentation, uneconomic holdings and loss of production while establishment of agricultural communes and setting up of agro-industries can bring about both economic and social changes of far reaching consequences, in that they will foster egalitarian values and check the emergence of classes. Since the government is committed to the upliftment of Scheduled Castes, it augurs well for it to devise such policies which would not lead to imbalance and create disparity right from the time of inception of programmes. The needy sections should avail the opportunities and in the normal course individual choice has to be merged with the larger interests of the group.

No one need accuse the government of killing the initiative. Democratic freedom is not licence. Panchayat raj institutions and co-operatives over the decades have provided really little relief to the needy and the downtrodden. In fact in the name of these people, new sections have emerged as powerful groups and exploit most of the benefits offered. Instead of fostering economic disparity and social degradation by paying lip-service to political democracy, there is a strong case for the government to further the cause of economic democracy and to promote social equality. If this cannot be done uniformly among all sections of Indians, at least a beginning towards this can be made with the Scheduled Castes. It is necessary to recall that homogeneity has to be forged in an otherwise heterogeneous group of Scheduled Castes.

Uneven development will multiply problems and lead to increased social inequality. The spate of caste and communal organizations which have sprung up since 1972 general elections encompass the whole country. Every big and small politician is directly or indirectly associated with these caste organizations. To them caste affiliation is not antithetical to secularism. At this rate the entire population will be divided and sub-divided on the basis of formal caste organizations and pressurise the government to protect the specific interests of each group. This is neither possible nor desirable. Hence

the government programmes to help the poor and the down-trodden are to be based on slightly different principles and need not be tagged on to fundamental rights and ownership of property.

If twenty years of protective discrimination policy is showing signs of class-mass distinction, it is imminent to pay urgent attention to the uplift of masses rather than cater to the classes. The latter should not be allowed to crystallize. For the it would amount to the government itself being a party to such disparity. There is need for change in the mode of political representation. It would be worth trying to make the political aspirants committed to the problems of Scheduled Castes than anything else. Otherwise a privileged section which has already emerged will crystallize and branch off to leave the unfortunate masses to trail behind grouping in the dark.

Formal education and employment and self-employment opportunities go a long way to alleviate the sufferings. As already suggested, the preferential treatment and opportunities should be gradually tapered and education made universally applicable. It is likely that the Scheduled Caste politicians will see a potential danger to their position and status in the emergence of educated, intellectual and official class. At present, Edward Shils points out, there are no intellectuals worth the name among Scheduled Castes. For many reasons this may be conceded. An intellectual class will not emerge from nowhere. It does depend upon certain prerequisites. The required background is absent at home for Scheduled Castes. While he cannot compete with intellectuals drawn from advanced sections or groups traditionally known for scholarship, the inside atmosphere in institutions of learning and in offices is just not conducive to Scheduled Castes. They have faced and are facing many formidable problems. While some of them do become economically viable, these fruits are hard-earned and not windfall profits.

The educated, intellectual and official groups among the Scheduled Castes cannot emerge as powerful groups. But they can provide a model for the masses. Given diligent and



industrious life, one can better one's economic conditions and develop a broader outlook. This need not be based on mass exploitation. The government bureaucracy, which is the most important agency for employing educated Scheduled Caste persons, is a universe where Scheduled Castes can hardly hope to develop vested interests or in some ways prove detrimental to the progress of the Scheduled Castes in general.

Since the time of Ambedkar, it is true a number of programmes have been evolved and implemented by the Central and State Governments. It is also true that some progress has been achieved by the Scheduled Castes. This is so in the field of politics and education. While political processes have led to creation of class and development of vested interests, education is not necessarily confined to advanced groups among Scheduled Castes, although the bulk of them have availed of these privileges. What is needed is to make it more liberal and take it to the Scheduled Castes in rural areas than concentrate in town and urban centres.

The practice of untouchability is more rampant in villages than in towns and cities. While touch-me-notism and distance pollution have slackened, entry to and use of public places like wells, teashops and temples are still not available to millions of Scheduled Castes in rural India. Services of barbers and washermen are also not available. These age-old and die-hard practices cannot be abolished by legislation. With increasing education and economic betterment, it is possible to envisage greater spatial and social mobility along with occupational mobility. These processes should help to develop a rational and secular attitude to a certain category of services.

Scheduled Castes cannot be marked off either ethnically or religiously from other Hindu groups. Scheduled Castes are mostly Hindus and it would be perhaps easier to integrate them with the Hindus. The element which has contributed to divide people into discrete groups, namely the caste system, should be legally abolished. If religion is private and personal, caste in the Indian context is a social fact which publicly

upholds high and low status. If untouchability continues today it is so as part of Indian caste system. Religion can be used as a powerful instrument of both social change or conservatism. Unfortunately much that is found in caste system has been enmeshed with Hinduism. Whether it is caste or Hinduism which is the stronghold of untouchability, is difficult to decide. However, for centuries, they have coexisted and buttressed one another. The need of the hour is to cut the gordian knot which binds these and allow religion to float and sink the caste. Unless this is done caste will take strange new forms under democracy and there will be increased competition and tension to safeguard the vested interests of each group.

There is need to match the political democracy with economic and social democracy. Social justice and equality will be meaningful when achieved rather than the ascribed status on the basis of birth, becomes the hallmark of individual existence. Constitutional guarantees and protective discrimination over a period of time instead of solving the problems might help to crystallize and turn this into a permanent feature. One happy trend is that no one wants to remain an untouchable and the pangs of untouchability leave a deep scar and bitterness. The difference between practice and experience of untouchability is that the former is easy and the latter implies a killing sense of frustration, groups being circumscribed and disabled.

Ambedkar was interested in the creation of an egalitarian society without the snobberies of caste and untouchability. It is with this end in view that several provisions were made in the Constitution. One of the effective instruments construed to bring about marked changes was the arming of Scheduled Castes with political power and participation. There could be no greater cause of consternation to the soul of Ambedkar than the fact that these political reservations have helped to create a class of neo-Brahmins from amongst the ranks of untouchables. If this is social change and leaders believe that enough is being done, it will only perpetuate the evil perhaps by adding another dimension to the problem.



Continued exploitation of the poor and the ignorant at best will keep the problem dormant. The need for a realistic approach to the problem and evolving policies and programmes of action should have in view the Scheduled Castes trapped in rural areas. Connotations of untouchability have lost much of their relevance to the political elites, the officials and the educated to some extent. The class-mass differences should be nipped in the bud, otherwise the purpose of entire constitutional provisions will be self-defeating. The day when provisions are revoked the problem should not become more baffling by the continued backwardness and disabilities of a large chunk of the so called Scheduled Castes.

## 10

### THE CRISIS OF SCHEDULED CASTE LEADERSHIP AND KARNATAKA POLITICS : INTERPLAY OF CONSTITUTION, CASTE, RELIGION AND POLITICS

#### I

The role of democracy and democratic leaders in many of the developing countries particularly in India show interesting variations and similarities at different levels. Illiteracy, pangs of poverty, hero worship, affluence, political, economic, religious bossism, caste and class snobberies co-exist in contemporary India and Karnataka State though not always amicably. In this chapter I wish to highlight the interplay of some of these forces in Karnataka State politics for a brief period of two years (1972-74), particularly with reference to the Scheduled Caste politicians.

The term Scheduled Caste is a 'legal fiction' and a constitutionally invented myth. It simply means listing some groups of people (castes) in a schedule. Scheduled Castes are not co-terminous with untouchables. Untouchability is constitutionally abolished and its practice in any form is made a punishable offence. However, in popular usage SCs are equated with Harijans and the latter with untouchables. Traditionally the



untouchables suffered from all kinds of deprivation and lived and still live as social lepers, discriminated, degraded as untouchables, unseeables and unapproachables.

While all these are blanket terms, the SC group includes within itself scores of castes and sub-castes with graded social inequality and often practising untouchability among themselves. All this has been part of the traditional Hindu social structure. There is no single group within the Hindu fold which is not concerned with status question and does not claim superiority. Rival claims for superior status have and are made though no one wishes to be identified as the lowest. The four-fold *Varna* system of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra is in fact an oversimplified and neat classification of Indian people. Historically *Sudras* are a most numerous disparate conglomeration of low yet clean Hindu castes who 'traditionally' formed the humble servants of the three upper groups.

In fact powerful Sudra castes have in the past risen to conquer and dominate the body politic. Shivaji and other Maratha rulers of Maharashtra, the Lingayat rulers of Coorg are cases in point. In contemporary India, the Sudra castes are putting forth several claims for political and other privileges on par with the SCs.

One of the constitutional provisions to uplift the SCs is to reserve to them certain number of seats, about 15 per cent in the different political bodies like the Village Panchayat Boards, the Legislative Assembly and the Parliament. Besides, there are educational facilities, job preferences and a host of other socio-economic and politico-constitutional provisions to help the down-trodden to come up. Provisions are one thing but their implementation quite another. The world's largest democracy with its vast bureaucratic administration, however, cannot be said to have seen the end of untouchability or improvement of the conditions of a vast majority of SCs.

The single provision which is instinctly implemented is the political reservations and representation. This has also been duly taken advantage of by SCs at different levels except village panchayats. Hence it is of interest to examine the role

of SC political leaders beyond village panchayat level. At lower levels their performance is rendered difficult because of obvious limitations, while at the upper levels it is dismal because of the interplay of several factors including individual idiosyncracies.

My purpose here is to highlight the high-low caste differences and particularly between the clean Sudra group and untouchable castes competing for political power, prestige and influence. In this fight the Brahmins and other upper castes seldom come into picture. The locally and regionally dominant 'Sudra' groups have come to wield power and hold the reins. Other caste groups generally gravitate round them. In this, SCs are no exception.

Since last two decades there has been considerable caste consciousness and unification of sub-castes for political purposes at all levels except among the SCs. As pointed out earlier SCs are not an entity. Precisely because of this kind of internal divisions, they have to attach themselves—both traditionally and in recent years—to some upper caste men. Like all minority groups, the SC persons cannot dream of coming to power especially in politics unless they find upper caste "god fathers".

By and large most of the political parties in India and Karnataka are headed by upper castes. Some of the local and regional parties have been dominated by Sudra clean Hindu lower castes if one can put it that way. But there has been no sign of even an attempt on the part of the SCs to organize a political party regionally or in the country, the only exception being the Republican Party of India (1957), a direct successor of the Scheduled Caste Federation (1942) which was founded, fostered and later dominated and buried by late Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The Republican Party even as it is functioning in Maharashtra, its birth place as well as other parts of India may be taken as a "near dead" party.

## II

The role of Ambedkar in organizing the SCs and fighting for the cause of the downtrodden cannot be understated. The



tough fight offered by Ambedkar on behalf of SCs culminated in constitutional benefits for their amelioration in free India. With the death of Ambedkar there has been crisis of leadership among SCs. This has many dimensions. The SC politicians who have come and gone have better served the purposes of political parties to which they were attached than SC causes.

Constitutional reservations has turned into a boon to many aspiring politicians to stake their claims for leadership. Political parties like Jan Sangh, Akali Dal, Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam have found it expedient to pick up and keep SC candidates in their parties. The biggest party which has always attracted the largest number of SC members is of course the Congress, the ruling party which also won freedom for India.

Even before India's independence, the Congress Party claimed to represent the masses and was mass-based but it was dominated by upper caste leaders only. Under the leadership of Gandhi it took a definite stand to face the challenge posed by Dr. Ambedkar. Ambedkar was articulate, vocal and at times aggressive. So he argued, what seemed to be quite successful, at the time, that SCs are not Hindus and obtained communal award at the Round Table Conference at London in 1932.

Mahatma Gandhi stoutly opposed it and went on a fast unto death until the award was nullified and Ambedkar was forced to sign the "Poona Pact" and retrace his steps. Gandhi shot two birds with one bullet. He proclaimed that Harijans—untouchables—are Hindus. As Hindus they cannot have communal representation. But as socially, economically, politically and educationally degraded Hindus, he was willing to concede some special provisions for their upliftment. Ambedkar thus lost the cause of SCs as a separate entity. Having retraced his steps once—rightly or wrongly—he was just not able to claim for SC separatism, though he kept on 'fumbling' along these lines for the rest of his life. Further as the Chairman of the Constitution Drafting Committee, he devised ways and means of improving SCs conditions. Accordingly, untouchability was constitutionally abolished. Certain

provisions were made to safeguard the interests of SCs. To begin with a ten years period was earmarked to provide political, educational and other economic opportunities to SCs.

Who constitute SCs, however, was not spelt out in the constitution. Theoretically SCs and untouchables are not coterminous, though they become synonymous on many occasions. An equally serious limitation was that only Hindu and Sikh SCs are entitled for 'preferential' treatment, while SC converts to other religions are technically disqualified for getting constitutional benefits. In one word the constitutional privileges are a direct reflection of Gandhi's views.

There is yet another constitutional flaw. A Hindu SC person alone can contest from a reserved constituency, but there is no corresponding obligation on the part of a successful candidate to work for the betterment of SCs. Since the voters are both SCs and non-SCs, under any circumstances non-SCs outnumber SC population and hypothetically speaking even if all the SC people boycott a particular SC candidate, he can still get elected on the strength of Non-SC voters. Thus the principle of political reservation does not carry the corresponding obligations. The principle in its operation speaks for the continuity of social stigma associated with SCs. In practice ambitious, powerful and intelligent SC politicians seek to cultivate the non-SCs and the demands of non-SCs naturally should score high.

From the positions of power the SC politicians if they wish to try to implement policies already evolved in favour of SCs. But if they may choose to ignore the SC problems altogether, there is nothing which could be invoked against them. Quite a few of them have had successful political career by choosing to be lukewarm as far as SC problems and their obligations to them are concerned.

Abolition of untouchability side by side with preferential treatment to members of this community has resulted in the legalization of the stigma of untouchability. One has to be



a Hindu to reap reservation benefits. Getting elected to reserved constituency amounts to publicly acknowledging the lowly status. Whereas the degrading status of an untouchable under normal conditions is known to a small circle, that of a politician is a public acceptance. Thus, there has been a basic and irreconcilably conflicting situation. To add to this, one's fundamental right to profess and follow religion of one's choice is denied to untouchable SCs aspiring for protective benefits.

Whether Ambedkar foresaw this or not is one thing. How such irreconcilable ideas can co-exist in a Constitution that affects the future of 16-18 per cent of India's population is another thing. Why the SC political leaders have been sleeping over it is yet another issue. Ambedkar gave green signal for the formation of Republican Party in place of exclusively caste based Scheduled Caste Federation and finally he died as a Buddhist. The constitutional provisions did not affect him. In a sense he and his followers were the first victims of these provisions. Did Ambedkar think that increasing political awareness and political power vested in the principle of reservation would eventually work miracles and turn SCs into a strong well-knit pressure group? Though political power is a powerful component, it is doubtful, as Ambedkar himself personally experienced, that SCs could become a strong pressure-group and attain bargaining position.

The Congress consciously or unconsciously groomed under its paternal care some SC candidates who were opposed to Ambedkar's ideology from the beginning. As a ruling party it is both judicious and firm in the matter of handling SC candidates. Often the ruling party made use of the sub-caste differences to create cleavages among SCs. In the first general elections of 1952, to the Parliament Ambedkar himself was defeated in the hands of a Congress nominee, a former political follower of Ambedkar. A Chambhar defeated a Mahar. This must have been an eye-opener to a person of Ambedkar's stature that individual SC persons—however intelligent they may be—their ambitions would thwarted

and attempts would be foiled precisely by pitching other sub-caste against them or sometimes by exploiting the idiosyncracies of members of the same sub-caste.

### III

The SC political leadership at the Government of India level has remained a monopoly of a single individual from the time of the Constituent Assembly (1947) and even before, when Congress was voted into power at Provincial levels during 1937. He was groomed to fight against Ambedkar and he is anti-Ambedkar. He has been the most successful Minister who has also assumed the role of traditional Brahmin revered by others by falling on his feet. This old Congress-man, a veteran freedom fighter was infact disapproved of by his party leader for having received a sword in token of his success as a Defence Minister in the liberation of Bangla Desh during 1971-72.

That the SC men have to attach themselves to some upper caste men, if they wish to be in politics is a truism. Since their representation in the Assembly, Parliament and Ministry is almost a constitutional gift, they are seldom tolerated to be original and vocal. They should toe the line of the party bosses both within and outside the party and legislature. Also the social values which have survived and to some extent directly fortified by the political machinery always try to associate caste status with behaviour pattern and occupations. In this way SC political leaders are constantly watched by the party bosses and the public, commented and admonished for lapses. The ideal behaviour pattern expected is subservience. Any deviance from this may warrant rebuke and admonition, if not serious disciplinary action. The Defence Minister's instance referred above is a case in point.

While the generation of freedom fighters is nearly extinct, the lingering few are left away in Congress Organization after the great split of 1969, when the party was divided more as a result of personality clash than of differences in ideologies as was made out. This entire process can be aptly



put in Merton's terms as follows: "The periodic efforts at 'political reform' turning the 'rascals out' and 'cleaning the political house' are typically (though not necessarily) short-lived and ineffectual. The reform may for a time bring new figures into political limelight; it may serve the casual social function of reassuring the electorate that moral virtues remain intact and will ultimately triumph; it may actually affect a turnover in the personnel of the political machine; it may even for a time to curb the activities of the machine as to leave unsatisfied the many needs it has previously fulfilled. But inevitably, unless the reform also involves a 're-forming' of the social and political structure, such that the existing needs are satisfied by alternative structures or unless it involves a change which eliminates these needs altogether the political machine will return to its integral place in the social scheme of things."

With little exception, this is exactly what has happened after the Congress split in India. The Ruling Congress gave a clarion call to cleanse the party, induct young blood, throw out old vanguards as reactionaries with vested interests. The party assured fair representation and treatment to religious minorities like Muslims and Christians, Scheduled Castes and Tribes and other backward classes. I shall confine myself only to political activities pertaining to SCs.

Religious minorities, weaker and backward sections of the Indian population have been successfully appeased by electoral promises of "garibi hatao" (banish poverty) so that the party was and is being voted into power with overwhelming majority at the Centre and in many States. Quite a number of Central Government ministers returned to State headquarters as Chief Ministers. An equal number were Brahmins either accidentally or perhaps because of their competence. Increasing number of politically rootless persons came to fill the ranks of Central and State Ministers. The malady caused by dissidents, floor-crossing, open defiance are not over. In all this, the fight for top political positions is invariably between upper groups and seldom it has descended

to lower castes especially SCs. Not a single State has had a SC Chief Minister belonging to the Congress Party since 1969 is a case in point. It reinforces the statement that SCs could function only as secondary leaders perhaps under tutelage, but seldom they could become assertive. I will substantiate this with reference to political matters in Karnataka since 1972.

Like many other States of India, in Karnataka (erstwhile Mysore) State also there were overnight mass "defections" from Congress organization to new Congress. Except for a hardcore of the then Chief Minister and Finance Minister most members of the Council of Ministers defected to new Congress. Thus, the Congress organization was brought down and the way paved for 1972 general elections to the State Assembly. Earlier the handful of new Congress members, who in other words were deprived and dispossessed politically and so constituted a disgruntled lot took advantage of the situation.

The elections to Parliament encouraged them beyond doubt since all the 27 candidates fielded by the new Congress still in a nebulous state were returned by the electorate. Armed with this success, they organized the new party with zeal and were successful in wooing to the party, sitting M.L.As. and new members from other parties. Thus, Congress organization turned into new Congress. The charisma of the Prime Minister of India had an overwhelming support, the new Congress was voted into power with astounding majority wherever elections were held.

#### IV

In Karnataka, the SC politicians were quick to grasp the change of wind and switched on their loyalty to the new party. A few associated fairly and helped to organize the party and others joined after resigning from the ministry and dissolution of the assembly. These members, however, continued to remain independent and there was hardly any rapport among them. They were all for power and positions for themselves but



declared that they were seeking it for the improvement of the conditions of the SCs.

I am inclined to point out here the SC leadership crisis particularly with reference to Karnataka. What is true of Karnataka is perhaps true of all other States of India and the Centre. Since the principles involved are inherent in the system, I will highlight them while discussing the empirical cases below. I have factual information for fifty odd SC Members of Parliament and Union Government Ministers of the Third Parliament (1962-1967). Such factual information, however, is lacking in the case of Karnataka political leaders.

The political crisis of 1973, in Karnataka precipitated a wholesale resignation of the Council of Ministers partly in a bid to strengthen the hands of the Chief Minister to form a new cabinet instead of a reshuffle. There was also a public demand in certain quarters and among certain groups to remove or not to remove particular ministers. At this juncture the cleavages were as much among the SC legislators themselves as between the SCs and non-SCs. The press played a very big role in playing up all this issue. Also press statements were issued by some important political leaders. My information on this case study is based on press reports and statements. The actual reformation of the ministry in which the major change was in connection with the SC members is an additional point in support of my argument.

In Karnataka, the SC candidates who 'defected' from Congress organization and joined new Congress were put in the bay and many of them were not favoured with party tickets to contest the elections in 1972. This manoeuvrability had an additional support from the declared policy of the party bosses to give preference to youth and induct as many new members as possible as if to contain the 'old' and the 'decrepit'. This did work to some extent. But the interesting point to observe is, that there was little understanding even among those SC members who had helped organize the new Congress in the State. Every one was self-centred and poised to come to power,

if not by individual merit, but by the active support of 'god fathers' both at the level of the Centre and the State.

Accordingly 'X' and 'Y' became members of the State cabinet both by the blessings of elders at Delhi. 'X' was supported by the then Congress President, another SC, though at the State level some other name was in circulation till the actual announcement and formation of the ministry. Likewise 'Y' was supported equally by political bosses from Delhi. It was a chance coincidence that they both had served as Deputy Ministers previously and they both belonged to old Mysore and to the same right-hand sub-caste among SCs. The members of another populous SC sub-caste, which went without proper representation, became jealous. Fights for proper representation in the cabinet were kept up by the members of the left-hand sub-caste till the very end and they succeeded though, again among themselves they were dissatisfied with the choice of a particular candidate.

'D', 'E', 'F' are other SC members who came from integrated areas of Bombay and Hyderabad, Karnataka both 'E' and 'F' were completely new comers to politics remained Ministers of State, in the cabinet during 1972-73. The three belonged to Lambani, Samagar and Mochi groups respectively. Old Mysore left-hand caste members did not reconcile, but took every opportunity to press their claim for cabinet positions. As ill-luck would have it, within a short period both 'E' and 'F' became centres of controversy in what might be termed as scandalous sex affairs. They created history which was played up both by the press and the opposition party of the assembly members. Eventually 'F' got into the centre of the storm of controversy. While the controversy raged on the floors of the assembly neither the implicated Minister nor the leader of the ruling party in the assembly issued statements in time. After the lapse of a week or so, when the leader issued a statement, sufficient time had been allowed to damage the image of the minister. The outcome of this controversy was that the minister resigned and the police were put on the task of tracing the woman who was the centre of this storm but had disappeared apparently moving in higher circles.



The first phase of the crisis in the SC political leadership was over with this. Other SC political leaders were lukewarm over the issue. While neither the press nor the assembly members had associated the event with caste status, unwittingly this was done by the Chairman of the State's Backward Classes Commission and his close associates. They issued a lengthy press statement about how political motivations were involved in mud slinging and character assassination of the SC minister. Thus, low tastes and behaviour pattern were once again sought to be derived from low caste status thereby misleading the public who failed to understand the role of vested interests with political motivations. However, the latter aspects were perhaps deliberately suppressed by those who wrote in favour of 'F'.

This incident is perhaps analogous to White-Negro relationships. If a superior person of upper castes indulges in actions bordering on moral turpitude no one pays any heed. But when such actions are attributed to SC persons, it becomes news and receives widest possible publicity. Permissiveness and non-conformity to the system is no crime on the part of the upper groups, while it becomes a crime for lower status groups.

Meanwhile 'X', the Cabinet Minister had become another centre of controversy. It was alleged that he issued most controversial press statements and made public speeches, from time to time. The Brahmins accordingly, especially the orthodox Hindus were abused for all the ills of Indian society and the poor lot of SCs. Hindu religion, gods and goddesses came in for attack and Gandhi was blamed for his supposed lukewarm attitude to SC problems. Finally Kannada literature, it is said, was derided as 'cattle feed'. This led to the final show-down.

Throughout these controversies spread about 18 months, the press gave wide publicity, while some dailies began ignoring the statements towards the end. While the blame is thrown on the press and vested interests for what eventually happened, the crucial point for purposes of this analysis is the disharmony

among the SC legislators themselves and self-seeking motives which dominated the scene. These may be adduced as prime causes for the sequel of events.

The pro-Ambedkar stance of 'X' presumably alienated the understanding, sympathy and support of the only powerful, SC leader from the Centre. To add to this, there was considerable pressure from 'A', the left-hand SC candidate, for representation in the cabinet. The fact that 'X' belonged to right-hand division may have served as an additional factor for apathy. Anyway, the reaction of the Congress high command, other leaders, as well as the public was unfavourable to 'X'. It was but natural that the response in Delhi political circles to 'X' was lukewarm.

The rapidity with which the events developed and filed up, the way the situation was handled is quite interesting. When there was hue and cry in the State Assembly, press, and the public against the alleged abuse of Brahmins, Hinduism, Hindu gods and goddesses, the Chief Minister passed it off in lighter veins by saying that 'X' is satisfying his 'itching tongue' and no serious notice or meaning should be attached to his utterances. This was an evasive and not a responsible reply but the matter subsided for the time being.

The controversial statements followed in a spate, perhaps, every two months. What meaning 'X' attached to them cannot be known for certain. Whether he simply raised controversy for the sake of controversy or derived pleasure out of it or wanted to create confusion and chaos is a matter of speculation. But one thing certainly was achieved and that was enormous publicity was given to him in the press and for some time it seemed to make him quite a popular figure in a limited circle of youths and socialists. It gained him admirers and extra-territorial popularity in the adjacent States. Particularly in Tamil Nadu, the D.K., D.M.K., and the infant A.D.M.K. members seemed to adore him. This popularity perhaps was taken at its face value and no efforts to organize and channelize the followers were ever made. The positive results of such support would have checked 'X' immediate political vulnerability stemming from the traditional system.



The first ever serious controversy was started from a lecture on 'economics of religion' at Mysore city during February 1973. During the course of the talk, reference to Gandhi's lukewarm attitude to SC problems in contrast to Ambedkar was alleged to have been made. A good deal of public reaction against the statement followed. In the legislature members made adverse comments. Particularly 'A' stated that a person who criticises Gandhiji, the father of the nation, had no right to be in the Congress organisation or hold responsible positions. Similar views echoed and re-echoed both within and outside the Legislative Assembly. A Okkaliga minister lashed at every time there was a controversy. It was also reported that this and many other controversial statements made on previous occasions were reported to the Prime Minister and Congress Party bosses in Delhi. No immediate reactions were visible from Delhi, although one could speculate that some amount of displeasure was registered over unwarranted controversy when the party, though in power in several States was experiencing many difficulties, mostly from within.

The next controversy centred around Harijan, mass conversion to Buddhism or other religion, discarding the pictures of Hindu deities and placing Ambedkar's photos instead as he was the real benefactor of the downtrodden. Long ago Buddha tried to reform, then, during 12th century Basava came on the horizon. Basava was a social reformer and forerunner of Veerasaivism (a sectarian Shiva movement). Veerasaivism to-day has boiled down to castes and sub-castes with all the attributes of the caste system like high-low status, ritually pure-impure and so forth. Then arrived Baba Saheb Ambedkar to champion the cause of the downtrodden. But the contagion of caste and Hinduism has survived beyond the time of all these three great reformers. On a couple of occasions 'X' described the Prime Minister after the fashion of Buddha, Basava, Baba Saheb Ambedkar and credited her with the laudable efforts and genuine interests for the uplift of the downtrodden.

It has become fashionable among all sections including the government to observe birthdays and death anniversaries of

important Indian leaders of past, including mythical, religious, social reformers and political leaders to mention only a few categories. On the occasion of Ambedkar Jayanthi, by about April-May, 1973 it was reported that 'X' while addressing a gathering described himself as a zealous crusader against all sorts of injustice and discrimination and claimed to be a successor in the line of Buddha, Basava and Ambedkar. By this time certain people who had already gathered around him seem to have encouraged this trend of thought. The press and certain other sections of people, however, made caustic remarks about the self-styled saviour in the line of succession of great reformers.

A little time after this, 'X' is reported to have styled himself a social worker, social scientist, abused the intellectuals in the country and of course all the officials of the bureaucracy were bitterly criticised as reactionaries, corrupt and not working properly. All this was viewed by many people with a good deal of reservation precisely because it came from 'X', a SC person. Similar claims and comments from upper caste politicians do not stir the people, but they get disturbed when it comes from low caste persons. Adverse comments were made in whisper in many circles. The SC officials and masses in the villages, however, were the groups which felt the heat of these reactions. But there was no visible move from any quarter to restrain.

Some sections of SC community mostly town-based and other youths as already pointed out were enamoured by the bold, challenging statements of 'X' and were attracted to him. They began to adore him, took him in grand processions, give him gifts of sword, symbolising thereby that he is the right person to cut the gordian knot of all that is rotting in Indian society. His imagination, if any, of being and becoming a saviour was thus fanned and nursed by one section of society, while the other section simply kept a watchful eye over the events.

'X' had also to his credit some laudable work as a minister which seemed to strike at the root of traditions and values. Two notable schemes of which one was to promote mixed



housing scheme including allotment of house sites to poor and deserving both in rural and urban sectors. This meant residential separation of high and low castes was attacked. In theory it was a welcome scheme in accordance with government of India policy, whatever the peculiar local and regional limitations it might have encountered. Another praiseworthy work consisted in the attempt to legally ban the removal and carrying of night-soil by headloads, regularising the services of scavengers with all the benefits on par with other government employees. This was acclaimed on all fronts including the Prime Minister and press. But by the same token he was increasingly involved in a series of Court cases challenging the legality and high-handedness of the orders, issued by him. Many cases are still pending before several Courts in different towns in the State. Favouritism was also one of the charges levelled in addition to many blasphemous utterances, derogatory remarks, abusive language and above all the arrogance that was attributed to 'X'.

The climax came sooner rather than late, and the popularity was shortlived. Around November 1973 an interested party invited him to speak to SC students of Mysore University. They claimed to represent the Ambedkar School of Thought, a registered association, with university college SC student members. It was during the course of this talk 'X' was stated to have compared Kannada literature (part or whole is disputed) to 'cattle feed' and exhorted the SC students to study English literature. For himself, if he had come to light and prominence, it was by studying English books on French revolution and so forth. There was nothing comparable in Kannada literature. It suffered from hanging to traditions and old values, hence failed to make them rigorous thinkers. As usual the press was dubbed as reactionary and the function was a grand success.

But the finale commenced from the next day. All the news papers carried reference to Kannada literature as cattle feed in bold letters in the front page. This was seized as an opportunity to bring him down. The situation was simply allowed to go out of hand by all responsible persons. His untimely

utterances were inept and often helped only to aggravate the situation.

The pro-Kannada zealots took it as an insult and an agitation was started in Mysore and Bangalore University centres. Students were involved and they began with a demand that 'X' should be removed from the ministry. All his idiosyncracies till then were partly condoned but this was sacrilegious and they began to quote the Thailand students role as exemplary to eliminate the underserving politicians.

Before the agitation could gather momentum, the question of passing derogatory remarks about Kannada was posed by students and public to the Chief Minister when he was on his way to Bangalore from a tour. The agitation was lingering and considerable time had been gained by then. The Chief Minister casually remarked to ignore the saying of 'X' as he was not an authority on Kannada. This gave more sustenance to agitators. For they now began to ask, how can a person, whose depth of knowledge in Kannada was shallow could sit in judgement against the language? It was construed as sheer arrogance on the part of the SC minister. So they were determined to force the issue and fight to finish.

Similar statements issued from time to time by caste Hindu scholars of Kannada literature have been on record. But no serious thought was given. 'X' coming from a low caste was presumed to aspire to become more powerful. There was need for some pretext to curb his growing authority and power. This event gave a fine opportunity not only to check him but even remove the possible threat to established authority. It did succeed because of the inherent values which uphold this kind of disparity between man and man on the basis of birth.

The students agitation intensified in Bangalore and they began to indulge in stone throwing, took out processions to press their claims to drop him from the ministry. Even as this was going on 'X' seems to have said that only two-and-a-half colleges in the city backed and organized the demonstration and not more than a couple of hundred students were involved in it and he knew who were at the back of these



agitations. The reference to two-and-a-half colleges and a couple of hundred students angered the student community. Its repercussions were echoed in different parts of the State.

Slogans and pamphlets appeared on streets and walls in any number. The Minister's effigies were burnt in countless number of places. It definitely took a violent turn and nearly created a law and order situation. The Chief Minister and other cabinet colleagues of 'X' did nothing to contain the situation. Some student leaders even began hunger-strike to press their claim. Meanwhile some SC students organized a counter demonstration in Bangalore and Mysore urging the Chief Minister to retain 'X' in the ministry. The Chief Minister, was perhaps in a dilemma and the situation had gone out of hand, almost beyond control.

At this juncture 'X' air-dashed to Delhi. But before leaving for Delhi he had met the Governor. The Chief Minister also met the Governor separately. Some quarters say that a call from Delhi was routed through State headquarters, so that the high command could take stock of the situation after summoning 'X' there. The Chief Minister disclaimed all knowledge of 'X' meeting him or the Governor before emplaning to Delhi, while 'X' himself claimed some engagements fixed earlier in Delhi as the reason for his Delhi visit.

Anyway after meeting the Governor and before leaving for Delhi, 'X' gave a public statement which made all his earlier activities and statements a hoax and nonsense. He said, that as a humble social worker coming from the lowest of the low, occasionally might get irate and say something in a fury. But the upper castes should be generous and give a margin and forgive him. Whether he said it out of duress, or in a mood of conciliation, it carried two different implications. His admirers got a rude shock at such cringing statement. Was this the man who received the sword in whom they had reposed so much faith as a revolutionary? These and similar thoughts continue to haunt them. Those who were against him took the statement as the confession of defeat. The man in his real colour was out according to them. They were determined to show him his place in the order of things.

'X' went to Delhi and news papers reported about his attempts to retain his position but in vain. Unexpected developments took place at the State headquarters. This was a fine move at this juncture which surprised all the people. Yet it could have been anticipated by 'X' much earlier. The cabinet met to discuss the events, but the ministers, both individually and in groups volunteered to resign from the cabinet to overcome the ugly situation and also to strengthen the hands of the Chief Minister to handle the situation in a free atmosphere.

Telephonic resignations from a few ministers who then happened to be away from Bangalore were received. 'X' was compelled to tender his resignation from Delhi in the light of new developments apparently to strengthen the hands of Chief Minister. Barring Chief Minister the whole cabinet resigned. The Chief Minister carried these resignations to the high command for consultations. What transpired in Delhi is not clear, but papers reported about the desperate efforts made by 'X', to continue as a minister and he even mustered some supporters.

Meanwhile 'A', the left-hand MLC, made a trip to Delhi, and seemed to have appraised the situation. His statement that nothing will happen—heavens will not fall—if 'X' is dropped from the cabinet and instead 'A' and 'B', who is the State Congress President, are included in the new cabinet were reported in the press. Incidentally 'B' is a close relative of 'X', and had joined the new Congress from Socialist party after the great split. It was 'B's' name that was in the air as a possible minister in the beginning itself. However, 'B' was elected as President of the State Party during 1972, in which capacity he continued after becoming a minister even while writing this article.

Unprecedented blocking of communication and transportation during the period further hampered and helped the shape of events to come. Indian Airlines had declared a lockout, so there were limited number of flights between Delhi and Bangalore. Swift movement would have provided oppor-



tunity for manoeuvrability. The fact, 'X' was locked up in Delhi, perhaps facilitated and made the entire process somewhat easy-going. Armed with the blessings of the Congress high command from Delhi, the Chief Minister returned to headquarters and announced the new council of ministers. From among his old colleagues he had dropped four cabinet ministers, a Brahmin, Muslim, Bunt and SC and two ministers of State a Okkaliga and another SC person.

Two ministers belonging to SC 'A' and 'B' were given opportunity while 'A' had strived for the position for months and months, 'B' hesitated first, took some time to decide and finally as it is said Congress High Command prevailed on him and forced him to accept. Another interesting fact was that 'F', the SC Minister of State, who had earlier resigned in the wake of a scandal involving a woman staged a come back. The woman was discovered after several months and she gave a statement clearing the mystery surrounding 'F' and her disappearance. This was enough proof of his innocence while there was no enquiry. 'D' was continued from the first to the second ministry automatically.

For quite some months, throughout 1973, reshuffle and enlargement of the State Ministry frequently figured in the assembly and press. But it did not materialise as it was also alleged that 'X' was a very powerful man in the cabinet and meddling with him was not an easy thing. Whether it was because of this fear or something else, the Chief Minister did not make up his mind to effect changes.

The way the events gathered momentum and the Chief Minister was given a free hand was perhaps the finest strategy that one could think of. Instead of a reshuffle, almost a new ministry came into existence. The Chief Minister was not guilty of removing only the controversial figures or SCs and thus incurring their wrath. Along with them some others were also dropped. Further, there was no need for him to be frightened of the consequences when SC members themselves were a party. At least one of them in his eagerness to become a minister had earlier publicised that no untoward event will

occur if 'X' is dropped. He struck to it and succeeded in the end.

Vested interests were blamed for playing up the students, financing the agitation and exploiting them. This is the kind of banal explanation that one often hears from all possible quarters, especially by politicians. It may be true to a certain extent. But it did not stop with the formation of the new ministry. By then caste Hindu students and SC students both at Bangalore and Mysore clashed on several occasions. SC students were hunted down wherever they happened to be, beaten, abused so that most of them ran for their life. Pitched battles were fought between SC and non-SC students several times. University authorities and the public remained helpless spectators for months.

A couple of socialist party members blamed the caste Hindus and said 'X' was prevailed upon and almost hunted down because he is an SC thus linking behaviour with caste status was again done unwittingly. That caste Hindu support to continue in office is more important is true enough. But caste Hindu ill-will alone brought him down is not totally true. Apparently the ill-will was converted into a first class opportunity by SC members themselves. The inter and intra-caste jealousy and hatred was voiced at personal levels in this case.

While these fights were on, some of the SC students shifted the responsibility on 'Y', another SC cabinet minister who was retained in the new ministry as 'traitor' and began attacking him. Their argument that he was the first to resign which precipitated the issue thus forcing everybody in the cabinet to resign. His public meetings were disturbed and he was attacked both in Mysore and Bangalore. The minister simply said, that he too knows who is at the back, and that he will handle the situation accordingly. The group of students who indulged in this were reported to have shouted pro-'X' and anti-'Y' slogans. So one naturally gets the impression that two SC leaders were again exploiting the student community precisely for personal ends. For non-SC politicians it is an



ideal situation to encourage one and pity the other. While all along the losers are the supporters, but seldom the leaders.

The disconcerting part of SC student reactions to the event is their absolute silence about 'A' and 'B'. The statement issued by 'A' was perhaps the most untimely and uncharitable one. Politics is a game and in a democracy self-interest is the best interest for a politician. It might have been rewarding for 'A' but this has implications of communal cleavages which could be exploited by clever upper caste politicians for decades to come as it has been done all these years.

The strange part of the story is that both 'A' and 'X' served as cabinet and deputy ministers from 1957-62. To both, tickets to contest the elections were denied by party bosses during 1962. They both contested as independents and got defeated. The interesting point is that two candidates belonging to Odda caste, comparatively new comers to politics defeated the 'seasoned politicians'. After the defeat 'X' went up to Supreme Court to plead Oddas as non-SCs. But meantime Oddas were included in the SC list by the government though now the State Government has again recommended to the Centre to list Oddas under Scheduled Tribe.

## V

The course the events took and how the issue was finally settled may be attributed to the interplay of vested interests against SCs as also the cut-throat competition and the letting down of one another ruthlessly practised by the SC members themselves. In all about 6-8 SC MLAs issued statements in favour of 'X'. The remaining 20 members kept mum and possibly busy fishing in troubled waters. Given this kind of discord, sub-caste cleavages, personal ambition and idiosyncracies, there is no hope whatsoever of the improvement of the lot of the downtrodden.

All the constitutional provisions including political reservation are time-bound. The continued attempts of scrambling for power among SC political leaders has left very little time

for them to work for the amelioration of the condition of masses. If democracy gives equal opportunities, here is a case of preferential treatment and protective policy. If the policy is abused for personal ends, there is nothing to check. But, the loss is for the people as such.

Ministers belonging to other castes were also dropped during the course. But corresponding caste MLAs nowhere openly issued adverse statements or asked for the favour as it happened in the case of SC politicians. Caste interests do cut across on many occasions, but on this occasion there was also infight which led to the exit of 'X'.

Political reservation at higher levels so far has functioned as a family preserve. Only a handful of ambitious persons are fighting to retain the glory. How can this help the cause of SCs in general? Even those who put forth their life mission as service of the downtrodden do not see the contradiction between their life style and that of SC masses. Many of them do not know the utterly dependent conditions of SCs in rural side. For the masses, SC politicians are as unapproachable as anybody else. The ignorance of the SCs is exploited by the SC political leaders. Given this, the deliverance of the SCs is no longer in the hands of SC political leaders. Political reservation has become redundant and it has and will serve another kind of vested interest. The sooner it is replaced by a different system when SC problems are the direct concern of those getting elected from reserved seats, better it is. Some tangible results could be then expected.

A final word in the form of conclusion is in place. 'X' simply made delightful public statements to sway the audience. Beyond this he perhaps remained oblivious of the consequences. This is borne out by the reflections of some of the ardent listeners of 'X's' speeches who also evinced keen interest and are still keen. According to them one of his greatest drawbacks is not responding, clarifying or defending his position after making a controversial statement. Both his remarks regarding Gandhi and Kannada literature according to them were apt and these statements could have been admirably



defended by him. But 'X' bungled the issues. He let it become complex and complicated. The effects of the remarks cost the supporters and admirers drawn from SC communities considerably particularly the students were put to plight.

SC students and youths could have been organized for more positive purposes. Since SC people are unorganized, it is the educated youth who could understand the interplay of caste discrimination, social justice and organized attempts on the part of caste Hindus and other vested interests not to allow the development of effective leadership among SCs. If SCs fail to organize themselves as pressure group, democracy and constitutional rights remain only on paper. The SC politicians should be prepared for sacrifices and not to be lured by the pomp and glory of offices. Individual betterment will not bring about upliftment of masses. It would work only the other way.

The plight of SC students at Mysore was duly taken advantage of by another SC politician, an ex-minister. He negotiated for restoring some confidence in students, to continue their studies. He was rewarded for his services. He was promptly elected to Parliament (Rajya Sabha) during March 1974.

Stripped of his powers 'X' still is popular with certain sections. But he does not seem to be in a mood or have the time to think along lines indicated in his several speeches earlier. It was reported of him as saying that his favourite social reformer Basava did everything as a minister only. Implicit in this statement is that he is able to work only from position of power. Deprived of position and power there is perhaps little that one could do. This perhaps is true in a democracy. But those who do not raise controversies by the same token are not necessarily the ones who do not work for the people.

Power and positions in a democracy are not supreme. The public are an undependable lot. They praise the leader to-day and take him to Himalayan heights, but the same people when irritated can work to bring about the worst. Equally

the public memory is shortlived especially so with reference to any good work. But their bitterness could be dangerous. To-day one seldom hears any reference being made to 'X' in connection with his good deeds like distribution of housing sites or forbidding loathsome scavenging services. But all his controversial statements are remembered and mentioned in small and big gatherings with a hint at the outcome.

A wise and successful politician in relation to public will strike a balance between these extremes. A selfless Ho-Chi-minh, Lal Bahadur Shastri or E.V. Ramaswami Naicker popularly known as Periyar are still remembered fondly. A person fighting for a good cause although it has all the limitations in the case of an SC has always a place, if not in politics, but amidst people. Learning to live with and for people is perhaps the greatest and most difficult art.

SC intra-caste rivalry and cut-throat competition is in fact encouraged by the caste Hindu traditionalists. By doing this they are lending themselves to be exploited by the very system which they in theory set out to fight. In a democratic system caste and class interest cut across, but they become integrated to maintain *status quo*. In the case of SCs this is on the surface. If they do not operate within the existing system, they are checked out. Some extra-democratic efforts to organize the illiterate masses to fight to live a respectable life should be the task of SC politicians. Without this SC mass-class distinction will add a new dimension to the already existing problems. There will be no solution in the foreseeable future.



## II

### INDIA'S SCHEDULED CASTE MPs : A SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROFILE

The data used below were collected in course of a leadership study of the Scheduled Caste MPs over six weeks during August-September 1966 when the Parliament was in its monsoon session. The present analysis is only preliminary to a full-fledged discussion which is to follow in the future. Pending a detailed study of the problems which would throw light on many interesting aspects, it is proposed to present here some significant facts and trends regarding the educational, economic, occupational, political, religious and social backgrounds including caste and sub-caste differences among the MPs.

The study was confined to the Scheduled Caste MPs and was undertaken in a private capacity. The limitations or shortcomings of the study, if any, can be fully considered when all the data go into a book length work.

Between the two houses of the Parliament—the Lok Sabha (House of People) and the Rajya Sabha (Council of State)—to the Lok Sabha the Scheduled Caste MPs get elected on the basis of "reservation". There is no "reservation of seats" for the Rajya Sabha. Hence Scheduled Caste MPs coming to the Rajya Sabha do so on the basis of 'personal merit' or spon-

TABLE 11.1

| States              | MPs       |               |             |               |       |
|---------------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|---------------|-------|
|                     | Lok Sabha |               | Rajya Sabha | Total covered | Women |
|                     | Total     | Those covered |             |               |       |
| 1. Andhra Pradesh   | 5         | 3             | 1           | 3+1 = 4       | 1     |
| 2. Assam            | 1         | 1             | —           | 1 = 1         | —     |
| 3. Bihar            | 7         | 3             | 1           | 3+1 = 4       | —     |
| 4. Delhi            | 1         | 1             | —           | 1 = 1         | —     |
| 5. Gujarat          | 1         | 1             | —           | 1 = 1         | —     |
| 6. Himachal Pradesh | 1         | 1             | —           | 1 = 1         | —     |
| 7. Kerala           | 2         | 2             | —           | 2 = 2         | —     |
| 8. Madhya Pradesh   | 5         | 2             | 1           | 2+1 = 3       | 1     |
| 9. Madras           | 7         | 6             | 1           | 6+1 = 7       | 1     |
| 10. Maharashtra     | 6         | 3             | 1           | 3+1 = 4       | —     |
| 11. Mysore          | 3         | 3             | —           | 3 = 3         | —     |
| 12. Orissa          | 4         | 3             | —           | 3 = 3         | —     |
| 13. Punjab          | 5         | 2             | —           | 2 = 2         | —     |
| 14. Rajasthan       | 3         | 1             | 1           | 1+1 = 2       | —     |
| 15. Uttar Pradesh   | 18        | 11            | 2           | 11+1 = 12     | 1     |
| 16. West Bengal     | 6         | 3             | —           | 3 = 3         | —     |
|                     | 75        | 46            | 8           | 53            | 3     |



sorship of their respective State legislatures. There is no "quota" or proportional representation in this regard.

The total strength of the Lok Sabha is 506 of which 76 belong to Scheduled Castes. Of these one MP is elected from the 'general' or non-reserved constituency while the remaining 75 are elected from the reserved constituencies. As they come from the different political parties, the bulk of them—43 of the total sample—belong to the Indian National Congress. Only about 12 or 13 of them, including a Cabinet Minister, are represented in the Rajya Sabha.

The present study covered a total of 53 MPs from both the houses, including the women MPs and a fairly representative sample from all the States and the political parties. Unless otherwise stated, the 53 MPs figure in the analysis throughout. Forty-seven members of the Lok Sabha—including 3 women MPs, one of them a Deputy Minister, one Cabinet Minister, and two Deputy Ministers—were covered. As indicated earlier, a total of 6 members of the Rajya Sabha, including a Cabinet Minister, was covered. Table 11.1 gives the State-wise distribution of the MPs in both the Houses, including Ministers, Deputy Ministers and women.

The ages of the MPs range between 21 and 80 years. According to the various age-groups the MPs (of both the Houses) can be grouped as shown in Table 11.2.

TABLE 11.2

| <i>Age-Group</i> | <i>Lok Sabha</i> | <i>Rajya Sabha</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| 21—30            | 1                | —                  | 1            |
| 31—40            | 7                | 1                  | 8            |
| 41—50            | 21               | 2                  | 23           |
| 51—60            | 14               | 1                  | 15           |
| 61—70            | 1                | 2                  | 3            |
| 71—80            | 3                | —                  | 3            |
| 21—80            | 47               | 6                  | 53           |

From Table 11.2 it is clear that the majority, as many as 38 MPs belong to the age-groups of 41-50 and 51-60. The MPs who are above 60 and 70 years of age are a few—in all 6. Likewise, the MPs below 40 years are only a few—9, only one of them being in the 21-30 age-group. This is an interesting point; and it assumes special significance in view of the general demand, voiced by the party leadership as well as the general public, for injecting “new blood” in politics, *i.e.*, bringing young men of energy and enthusiasm into the Parliament which is felt to have been dominated for nearly two decades by rather old and senior politicians.

Nearly 48 MPs stated that they were Hindus by religion. Of the remaining, 2 were Buddhist (neo-); one was Sikh; another Arya Samajist; while the third claimed to be a Vedic Dharma-valambi. The MPs of the other categories—Buddhism, Sikhism, etc.—also can be regarded as very much Hindu in their rituals and practices. Indeed, in a fundamental sense all these categories can be said to be variants of Hinduism. A glance at the history of Hinduism is enough for one to realize that Hinduism has shown a remarkable capacity to subsume in theory the various diverse faiths, but to divide them in practice into minor groups.

The above relation between Hinduism and its variants is crucial for the understanding of “untouchability”. Can one cease to be an untouchable by embracing one of the variants of Hinduism? The answer, as illustrated by the experiences of the MPs, is largely in the negative. Except one Buddhist member of the Lok Sabha (and another of the Rajya Sabha) it is against the “reserved” seats that the Buddhists have been elected to the Lok Sabha. The Buddhist MPs felt that the new label of Buddhism was not very helpful; for back in their villages they were still identified as Mahar, Chamar-Jatav, Jatiya, and so on.

What were the “Scheduled Castes”? According to one MP, a Deputy Minister from Andhra, the term did not convey anything in particular. The Government of India, for expediency, had classified people into forward, backward and the Scheduled Castes and Tribes. Members of the castes, upon reaching



a certain desired level of educational and economic development, could be "de-scheduled". This had been already indicated by the Lokur Committee Report.\* The Deputy Minister felt that the term "Harijan", coined by Mahatma Gandhi, was "preferable" as it was pretty comprehensive and included the various untouchable castes including the lowliest. Did one's being called a Scheduled Caste depend upon one's religion? It appeared it did not. As many as 52 MPs described themselves as members of the Scheduled Castes despite the religious differences.

The problem of determining the relative rank and status of people on the basis of membership of a particular caste-group is difficult, if not impossible. Any sociology student of the Indian caste system will understand, and is not surprised at the increasing number of castes and sub-castes, based on minute distinctions, as enumerated by the informants while discussing the caste system. The Scheduled Caste MPs are no exception to this. Most of them were convinced at the hollowness of the phrase "Scheduled Castes"; but did not feel the solution lay in the blanket term, "Harijan". To them, a caste did convey a major group with a cluster or number of sub-castes. The sub-caste differences were very real for all practical purposes including the life crises such as birth, wedding and death ceremonies. The term "Scheduled Castes" thus seemed to have only political connotation.

Traditionally, the membership of a caste-group is based on birth. A number of qualifying attributes or features of a sub-caste such as occupation, profession, and the people from whom one can accept food and water and seek brides or grooms are very important. The regional, cultural, and linguistic differences further add to the complexity of the situation. Thus, the tasks of determining, with a satisfactory degree of accuracy or uniformity, the sub-castes to which the MPs belong becomes really baffling. There are not only sub sub-castes within a caste-

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\*Officially known as The Report of the Advisory Committee on the Revision of the Lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (New Delhi), Government of India, Department of Social Security, 1965.

group but there is also a graded hierarchy among them, based on superior and inferior status between whom there could be no interdining or inter-marriage.

The most widespread Chamar caste-group in North India includes in itself a number of sub-castes based on minute yet significant differences that have led to the crystallization of each group as distinct from another. The Dhusias, for instance, specialize in skinning dead cattle. The Jaiswars deal in hides and bones ; the Raigars specialize in tanning, some of them further specializing in shoe-making and cobbling; and the Meghwars have taken to agriculture and weaving. A most rationalized reply for the traditional occupation invariably turned out to be "agriculture". But the occupation does not appear to be so significant a factor in determining one's sub-caste. As one of the Cabinet Ministers put it, "Though for the past three generations my family has had nothing to do with cobbling, I am still considered a Chamar". So even traditional occupation has lost its significance. Hence what emerges as a major determining factor is the fact of birth into the sub-caste.

Table 11.3 presents the State-wise and occupation-wise classification of some of the sub-castes among the Scheduled Castes. Though comprehensive enough from the point of view of the data collected, this is by no means an exhaustive classification.

With regard to the knowledge and use of the various Indian languages, most of 53 MPs know at least one language in addition to their mother-tongues. A total of 7 MPs out of the 53 stated that they did not know English. Forty-six MPs could make themselves understood in English, a few of them with some difficulty. The English of one of the 46 appeared to suffer under a self-imposed ban ; he had taken a vow not to speak English. Even the English-educated MPs—from the Hindi speaking areas—seemed to be ill at ease while expressing themselves. Some of them did not mind taking the trouble of helping the South Indians in adopting Hindi as the national language. Quite a few of them stated that however, brilliant



an orator one was (in English)—as was the case with one of the Cabinet Ministers hailing from the South—he could not provide an effective leadership to the masses in the Hindi-speaking areas. A Jan Sanghite and a Swatantra Party member appeared dogmatic and even somewhat fanatical on this point.

TABLE 11.3

| <i>Sr. No.</i> | <i>States</i>                            | <i>Caste</i>       | <i>Sub-Castes</i> | <i>Traditional Occupation</i>                   |
|----------------|--|--------------------|-------------------|---|
| (1)            | (2)                                      | (3)                | (4)               | (5)   |
| 1.             | Andhra and<br>Karnataka                  | Adhikarna-<br>taka | —                 | Agricultural labour                             |
|                |  | Adi-Andhra         | —                 | Agricultural labour                             |
|                |  |                    | Holeya            | Agricultural labour                             |
|                |  |                    | Madiga            | Dealing in hides                                |
|                |  |                    | Mala              | Weaving,<br>Music (ians)                        |
| 2.             | Assam                                    |                    | Patni             | Agriculture                                     |
| 3.             | Bihar,<br>Rajasthan and<br>Uttar Pradesh | Chamar             | Cobblers          | Shoe-making                                     |
|                |  |                    | Dhusia            | Women acting as<br>mid-wives to<br>caste Hindus |
|                |  |                    | Jaiswar           | Dealing in bones<br>and hides                   |
|                |  |                    | Jatav             | Agriculture-labour                              |
|                |  |                    | Kureel            | Agriculture-labour                              |
|                |  |                    | Meghwar           | Weaving   |
|                |  |                    | Raigar            | Tanning   |
|                |  |                    | Raidas            | Tanning, shoe-<br>making, cobbling              |
|                |  | Buddhist           | neo               |   |
|                |  | Balmiki            | —                 | Sweeping, scaven-<br>ging                       |
|                |  | Mehtar             | —                 | Sweeping, scaven-<br>ging                       |

(Contd.)

TABLE 11.3 (Contd.)

| (1)                 | (2)     | (3)    | (4)       | (5)                             |
|---------------------|---------|--------|-----------|---------------------------------|
|                     |         | Pasi   | —         | Swine-herding                   |
|                     |         | Khatik | —         | Agriculture-labour              |
| 4. Gujarat          |         |        | Vanicar   | Weaving                         |
| 5. Himachal Pradesh |         |        | Koli      |                                 |
| 6. Kerala           |         |        | Cheruma   | Agriculture-labour              |
|                     |         |        | Korava    | Basket making, etc.             |
| 7. Madhya Pradesh   |         |        | Erwar     |                                 |
|                     |         |        | Erwar     |                                 |
|                     |         |        | Satami    | (Originally Chamar) Agriculture |
| 8. Tamil Nadu       | Adi-    |        |           | Agriculture-labour              |
|                     | Dravida |        | Pallan    | Agriculture-labour              |
| 9. Maharashtra      |         |        | Mahar     | Agriculture-labour              |
|                     |         |        | Chambhar  | Cobbling                        |
|                     |         |        | Dhor      | Tanning                         |
| 10. Orissa          |         |        | Pan       | Music(ians)                     |
|                     |         |        | Haddi     | Sweeping, Scavenging            |
| 11. Punjab          |         |        | Dhanak    | Agriculture                     |
|                     |         |        | Muzabi    | (Balmikis converted to Sikhism) |
|                     |         |        |           | Agriculture                     |
| 12. West Bengal     |         |        | Sunri     | Dealing in liquor, agriculture  |
|                     |         |        | Podh      | Fishing, dealing in liquor      |
|                     |         |        | Rajbhonsi | Agriculture                     |

Besides their mother-tongues, the MPs knew several languages. One of them claimed knowledge of as many as six languages; 4 knew five languages; another 4, four languages; 16, three languages; and 20, two languages. Eight knew only one



language, one of them knowing only English besides his mother-tongue ; the remaining seven did not know English, but knew some other Indian language.

Two of the 3 sweepers have learnt Sanskrit, and quoted profusely from the sacred texts. One of them said he was training his son in Sanskrit to prepare him for priestly duties. Refusal of priestly services by Brahmin priests, not to the individual MPs, but to their community in general may be said to have motivated such members of the Scheduled Castes to take up the study of Sanskrit for ritual purposes. In general, the MPs coming from the different States know the languages of the respective States which in many cases happen to be their mother-tongues also. This can be seen in Table 11.4 below :

TABLE 11.4

| <i>States</i>       | <i>Languages</i>      | <i>No. of MPs.</i> |
|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Andhra Pradesh   | Telugu                | 4                  |
| 2. Assam            | Bengali (Assamese)    | 1                  |
| 3. Bihar            | Hindi, Maithili       | 4                  |
| 4. Delhi            | Hindi                 | 1                  |
| 5. Gujarat          | Gujarati              | 1                  |
| 6. Himachal Pradesh | Hindi                 | 1                  |
| 7. Kerala           | Malayalam             | 2                  |
| 8. Madhya Pradesh   | Hindi, Bhundel Khandi | 3                  |
| 9. Tamil Nadu       | Tamil                 | 7                  |
| 10. Maharashtra     | Marathi               | 4                  |
| 11. Karnataka       | Kannada               | 3                  |
| 12. Orissa          | Oriya                 | 3                  |
| 13. Punjab          | Punjabi, Hindi        | 2                  |
| 14. Rajasthan       | Rajasthani            | 2                  |
| 15. Uttar Pradesh   | Hindi, Hindustani,    |                    |
|                     | Urdu, Persian         | 12                 |
| 16. West Bengal     | Bengali               | 3                  |
| Total               |                       | 53                 |

The language provides one of the most effective means of communication. The effectiveness and facility with which a person can communicate his ideas is one of the most basic requirements of dynamic leadership. From this point of view, the multiplicity of the languages, while it makes for the multi-lingual MPs, adds to the difficulties of communication among them, particularly between those from the North and the South. (This would be true of the non-Scheduled Caste MPs also). It would not be entirely wrong to say that this factor (difficult communication) is one of those which explain why some of the Scheduled Caste MPs are not so vocal or effective in the Parliament as they should be.

The fact that in a vast country like India, where 80 per cent of people still live in villages and nearly as many get no opportunities for formal schooling poses certain serious problems. Education enables a person to understand things, articulate his thoughts and makes him vocal. The (educated) "elite" in India provide leadership and run the government. In the absence of universal literacy, democracy here is still a rule of the educated minority.

The following Table 11.5 indicates the educational background of MPs as reflected by the qualifications or degrees attained by them at the school or university.

TABLE 11.5

| <i>No. of<br/>MPs.</i> |     |            | <i>Degrees/Qualifications</i>                |
|------------------------|-----|------------|--|
| (1)                    | (2) | (3)        | (4)  |
| 1.                     | 4   |            | M.A. (One is studying law)                   |
| 2.                     | 3   |            | M.A., LL.B.                                  |
| 3.                     | 1   |            | M.Sc. (Agriculture, Texas)                   |
| 4.                     | 3   |            | B.A. (One of them who is 53 is studying law) |
| 5.                     | 1   | University | B.Sc.  |
| 6.                     | 1   |            | B.A., B.Ed.                                  |

(Contd.)



TABLE 11.5 (Contd.)

| (1)      | (2) | (3)          | (4)   |
|----------|-----|--------------|---|
| 7.       | 4   | or           | B.A., B.L. or B.A., LL.B.                           |
| 8.       | 1   |              | B.Sc., LL.B.  |
| 9.       | 1   | College      | B.Sc., LL.M.  |
| 10.      | 1   |              | B.Sc. (Home & Social Science,<br>London), L.T.      |
| 11.      | 3   |              | (Up to) B.A.  |
| 12.      | 2   |              | Hindi Honours (broadly equivalent<br>to B.A.)       |
| 13.      | 4   |              | (Up to) Intermediate Arts.                          |
| 14.      | 1   |              | Pre-University Course (P.U.C.)                      |
| 15.      | 1   |              | L.M.F.  |
|          |     | Sub-total 31 |   |
| 16.      | 8   |              | Matric, SSC or S.S.L.C. (All<br>broadly equivalent) |
| 17.      | 6   |              | (Up to) Matric                                      |
| 18.      | 2   |              | 10th Standard                                       |
| 19.      | 1   | School       | 9th Standard  |
| 20.      | 2   |              | 8th Standard  |
| 21.      | 2   |              | Lower Middle School                                 |
| 22.      | 1   |              | Junior High School                                  |
|          |     | Sub-total 22 |   |
| Total 53 |     |              |   |

From Table 11.5 it is clear that almost all the Scheduled Caste MPs had the benefit of formal schooling, although the duration in some cases was minimal. A number of MPs hold degrees in arts, sciences, law and medicine. Nearly 22 of them had only school level education; of them 2 stated that they could just sign their names, though they did attend the school. Now they were making efforts to learn more. At least 2 MPs (in the mid-40s) stated that they were studying

law. Increasing number of them are acutely aware of the deficiency or absence of formal education and especially legal training. The business of government as they understand can be better transacted with legal knowledge.

Their experience in the Parliament is providing them with an incentive and is bringing home to them the importance of, and providing an incentive to, education not merely as regards the members of their family but also as regards as necessary for the removal of untouchability. A look at the data on the education of the members of the MPs' families, etc., would be rewarding and shows a clear trend towards more and higher education. They do not seem to make any distinction between educating boys and girls; they want to educate them both. Many of them prefer their sons qualifying in professional and technical courses. The reasons are obvious: higher employment and earning potential of these courses. Some of them do not want their (educated) women folks to go out for work.

Several MPs have been outside India ranging from a few days to a few years. Some went as delegates. Of the 53 MPs, as many as 20 had the opportunity of travel abroad in countries like the U.S.A., England, France, Germany, Switzerland the Soviet Union, Egypt, Nigeria, Kenya, the countries in the Middle East, Japan, Burma, Malaysia, Thailand, Australia, Ceylon, Jamaica and Cuba. Two of the MPs had been abroad for higher studies, one to the London University and another to Texas in the U.S.A. Three had been to Ceylon for work and study. Five travelled in their capacity as Ministers and Deputy Ministers leading or being members of delegations or study teams. One of them spent a few years of his boyhood with his father in Burma. Both the Buddhist MPs had been out to attend the world Buddhist conventions; one of them visited the U.S.A. at the invitation of the "India Friends Union" there. One MP went to Singapore and Malaya to study the conditions of the Scheduled Caste people there. Three of them have visited neighbouring countries like Burma in course of their military service during World War II. One had benefited from his stay abroad in



that he was born in Jamaica and spent some time in Cuba. The rest of the MPs usually went as members of delegations or the Commonwealth conferences, etc.

Regarding the marital status of MPs, all the 53 are married. One is a widow, another a widower who lost his Brahmin wife after becoming an MP. A total of 5 MPs have 2 wives each. Perhaps, they married long back. They married a second time, because they did not have children by the first wives, or the wives became invalid, or the second wives were considered a helping hand for the heavy duties of the household. The remaining 46 MPs have only one spouse each; one of them has a Brahmin wife. Including a Minister, only 4 have remarried after the death of the first wife. One has married a Brahmin (apparently), and the other a widow with a child. Three of the 6 Rajya Sabha members are still without children; one of them has two wives and comes within the age-group of 61-70.

We have considered above the literacy and educational background of the MPs. It is interesting and important to know about the literacy and educational background of their wives also. The wives are thought to shape or influence sometimes their husbands' thinking or decision-making. But there does not seem to be any evidence to support the proposition in case of the MPs under study. Perhaps, the proposition that the husbands influence the wives' thinking is easier to support. One MP's wife is an MLA (at State level); another's is an MP (he was an MLA in the past); a third's wife succeeded him as an MP after his death. Wives of 4 MPs do social work. That an educated wife is an asset is not wholly supported. Among the MPs' wives, one is an M.A.; another a B.A.; a third she studied up to B.A.; one has passed Intermediate; 4 have passed Matriculation; and 3 have studied up to Matric. Some 13 MPs' wives are illiterate. (The rest are literate). One of the foreign-returned MPs said that many parents were willing to marry their educated daughters to him. But he preferred—and would always prefer—an illiterate wife. Because an illiterate wife could easily adjust.

The social background of the MPs with reference to their places of birth and permanent residence is of some importance.

An urban background is likely to provide an MP with a somewhat better start in terms of economic resources, educational facilities, and, above all, political awareness and wider contacts. About 17 MPs hail from towns; while the remaining 36 come from villages; the latter, when they went to schools and colleges in the towns and the cities, also came under the urban influence which provided them with incentives to take to politics.

Nearly 20 MPs have changed their residence from the places of their birth. Eighteen of them have changed from villages to towns of varying sizes. Some have changed to taluka headquarters; others have shifted to district headquarters; and a few have moved to metropolitan cities. The towns and cities which are centres of politics and administration serve as a basis for organisation and operation of political parties. MPs coming to settle in the towns and cities naturally expect to build up, and generally do, a circle of friends, admirers, and followers who help them and are helped by the MPs in turn. The sphere of influence of a Scheduled Caste MP in the villages is very limited. The notions of low caste status die hard. In a town, it is easy to live amidst the caste Hindus without being subjected to segregation or the humiliation of being treated as untouchables. This observation emerges quite clearly from the experiences of at least 3 MPs from the South.

Food, in India, does not serve biological needs alone. The dietetic habits—vegetarianism or non-vegetarianism—determine the caste status also. Upper-caste people and Brahmins are generally vegetarians, while a majority of lower castes and non-Brahmins eat meat. Meat-eating combined with drinking of alcohol or even dealing in alcohol, degrades the status of people. Hence such people are usually classed as low caste. Another basic feature of the Indian dietetics is related to beef-eating. Needless to say that there is a gradation of status even among the meat-eaters; the beef-eaters rank low, and those who eat carrion-beef are the lowest. Those Scheduled Castes which remove the dead cattle of their caste Hindu patrons, skin the animals, deal in bones and hides are alleged



to eat beef-carrion. In the field situation, it was rather difficult to probe into all these delicate or sensitive matters.

A majority of the MPs would, probably, dismiss the thought or suggestion of beef-eating, although it is quite possible that their ancestors in the distant past, three or four generations ago, ate beef.

Out of the 53 MPs, 42 stated that they were taking non-vegetarian food. The remaining 11 declared they were vegetarians. It is interesting to note that all the 3 MPs drawn from the scavenger castes are vegetarians. Three out of 6 from the Rajya Sabha are vegetarians. One MP said that, except himself, others in his family were vegetarians. His entry into politics which brought wider contacts forced him to take to meat. Another gave more or less the same reason, and supported his statement that, as a student, he was a "pure vegetarian." Although there is a preference for vegetarian food among upper castes, with the increasing impact of outside influence, a process of "Westernization" has set in. Among the highly educated and widely travelled upper caste people, meat-eating and drinking alcohol have become status symbols. In general, the line of distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian food is being blurred. Whether this distinction will become blurred or disappear altogether in the future is difficult to say now. While the upper castes seem to be becoming liberal about the food items, the Scheduled Castes—at least some of them—seem to be consciously giving up their traditional food habits and taking to the Brahmanical ones. In short, through "Sanskritization" of food habits, they seem to be becoming total vegetarians.

About 28 MPs come from joint families, the remaining come from nuclear families. (The husband, wife and their children generally constitute a nuclear family, with the husband as the head). Of the 28 MPs' joint families, 8 are headed by the fathers of the MPs; 5 by their elder brothers; one by the paternal "cousin-brother" (patrilineal parallel cousin); and one by the father-in-law. The remaining 13 joint families are headed by the MPs themselves. Their headship actually

is nominal and is looked upon as conferring prestige on the other members of the family. For all practical purposes, the next senior man looks after the family while the MP is busy during the sessions or otherwise. This kind of freedom from the daily chores and household responsibilities and freedom to develop leadership qualities and advantages is possible against the stable background of kinship network in a kinship-oriented society like the one in India. However, the kinship network can also be a stumbling block to an MP's career when the liabilities or obligations outweigh the advantages.

A note of caution is necessary, at the outset, while considering the economic background of the Scheduled Caste MPs. The economic background turned out to be a most elusive factor during the enquiry. Also, there was no way of checking the information in this regard. One of the Deputy Ministers remarked, rather impishly, that the property accounts given by some MPs needed to be considered realistically. As for himself, he said, "Mine is an open book ; I submit my accounts periodically to the Congress (Party) Organisation". Curiously, even this open book case was not so informative. In short, for a variety of reasons—the details of which need not be entered into here—it was not possible to secure as accurate information on the property background as would have been desirable for the study. However, the following account, though only a rough indication of the realities, can prove sufficiently enlightening.

Each of about 42 MPs own some land, irrigated or non-irrigated. The range of possessions varies from a few acres to 100 acres. Probably only 3 or 4 MPs own large acreage. Fifteen MPs have garden plots of various sizes. On these they raise vegetables, fruits, onions, chillies and so forth—mostly for family consumption. Two MPs have fish-ponds ; one has a hotel and a dairy in Bombay.

Fifty of them have their own houses—at least, one each—back in their respective places. The remaining two—a Minister and an ex-soldier—do not have any houses of their own.

Two MPs run higher secondary schools. One operates a



25-mile-range bus service. Another has a rice mill and a cinema house. As regards the other sources of wealth or income, the following were mentioned. One MP owns a printing press; another has a saw mill; while a third has a wholesale wool business. Two MPs, as legal practitioners, receive a small fee. Forty-eight MPs receive a monthly salary of Rs 500.00 (each); while two Cabinet Ministers and three Deputy Ministers draw four-figure monthly salaries. However, most of the MPs and the Ministers stated that their salaries were the chief source of their income, the other sources being unsteady and insignificant. Fifteen MPs own jeeps; 18 of them have their own cars; one of them has two. Three MPs have registered for new cars.

When the MPs were asked the economic class to which they belonged none said he belonged to the "upper class". As many as 38 said they belonged to the middle class; 2 classified themselves as the upper-middle class; 3 as the lower-middle class; while 10, including a Minister, plainly described themselves as belonging to the lower class. They (the ten) also felt that they could be described as belonging to the middle class, if only because of their political or social standing as MPs, but not otherwise. Discussions with some MPs revealed that at least 2 of them, one from the South and another from the North, are "Birla's" among the Scheduled Castes. This is obviously an exaggeration. The position nearer truth would be that they are very rich. The facts that they have an attitude of reservation and a feeling of superiority in relation to their fellow MPs, that they do not mix freely with them, and that they are generally very calculating in money matters, seem to have combined strangely to give them the sobriquet of "Birla's".

The above analysis suggests a profile of men who mainly come from joint families with their advantages and disadvantages; who believe that they belong to the middle class, whose economic position is constituted by their monthly salary, a house each, and other varying but generally insignificant means of income, who have a moderate degree of education and would like to acquire more; who are generally "multilingual"

which fact paradoxically enough considerably handicaps free communication; whose ages range from 21 to 60; and who are divided among themselves—and, therefore, to some extent, alienated from one another—by the numerous castes, sub-castes and even sub sub-castes as determined by considerations of birth, occupation, and residence in the various States of India.

Because of the last factor (birth-ascribed status, etc.) the stigma of untouchability continues to stick fast, and mean psychological frustration and social disadvantages. The battle for the elimination of untouchability continues to be fought on the various fronts. Of late, the State Governments (because of their own policies and the influence of the leaders) are entertaining proposals to continue the "reservation" of seats for the Scheduled Castes in the Parliament and the State Legislatures (which would involve a constitutional amendment); to double the Third Five-Year Plan expenditure (Rs. 114 crores) on the Scheduled Castes during the Fourth Plan; and to move a constitutional amendment for a more rigorous and effective enforcement of the Untouchability Offences Act (by making the punishment for its violation more severe). All these factors would seem to justify the conclusion that untouchability is still very much alive and the above sketched profile of the Scheduled Caste MPs will continue to be relevant for quite some years to come.



## AN OVER VIEW

To the students of Indian society, the social structure essentially consists of various castes and sub-castes, the rigidity that seems to govern the stratification hierarchy is tampered by ritual and economic interdependence among castes. The ritually higher and economically better groups also command and exercise considerable political and juridical authority. The four fold *Varna* division consisting of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vysya and Sudra is too simplified and neat picture of Indian society. The Vedic society is said to be less rigid and linked to a class society where mobility from one group to another was possible. There is little reliable information regarding the existence of the fifth group or 'Panchamas' during the Vedic period. However, in the writings of Manu not only there is reference to people of four varnas as 'Savarnas' but a category of 'Avarnas' or the 'fifth group' or Panchamas had emerged. Since the time of Manu Smriti, Indian social structure has contained within itself a group of 'Avarnas', who generally are engaged in menial and manual work and remain 'humble servants' of upper castes.

From the point of view of upper castes, the untouchables are ritually impure and a source of pollution. Economically they are dependent upon their upper caste masters and so politically they always lived in subordination. Occupation, food, dress and almost all aspects of secular life is being graded and governed by rigid rules of ritual purity and impurity. Accordingly the rights and privileges were either enjoyed or denied

to caste groups. The ritual status of untouchables disqualified them from taking to occupation such as learning earmarked for upper castes. The single exception being agriculture. Untouchables seldom possessed lands but they have always constituted agricultural labourers working for their caste Hindu masters.

The political changes brought to bear upon Indian soil under the Muslim and British rule was superimposed on the native structure. The indigenous power relations within the framework of caste system, however, continued without let or hindrance. The changes brought about, if any, affected the structure only marginally. This, however, is not to state that caste structures have remained in pristine purity. The fortunes of indigenous feudal rulers often altered the ranks and statuses of sections of population. Also processes of 'Sanskritization' of customs and the ritual practices on the model of upper castes, by the lower castes have led to changes. In addition internal social reformist movements within India and Hinduism did attempt to bring about changes. These movements by and large appealed to the religious susceptibilities of men and the leaders of these movements in Weberian terms could be described as charismatic leaders.

The leaders of these movements advocated for changes, and a new order, pleaded for equality of men. But they never had a clear plan about the social order and did not make any attempt to improve the status of the downtrodden and untouchables in particular. There was a humanitarian approach. The religious movements which came in the wake of foreign rulers; Islam and Christianity also made their own contributions to and brought about a few more changes.

All these efforts to bring about changes did not affect the fundamental character of the Hindu social structure. It survived the internal and external forces of reform and what is more interesting to note is that the reformist movements themselves underwent transformation and each reformist attempt resulted in further proliferation of castes and sub-castes. Hence the graded hierarchy continued and the rules of castes remained ]



the governing laws of social life. Conversion to other religions have not helped to improve the social status of SC communities.

With the emergence of Indian National Congress which provided leadership that lead to the ultimate liberation of the nation from imperial rule, the Congress included within its programme of action, welfare of the downtrodden, the socially oppressed, the untouchables were renamed by Mahatma Gandhi as 'Harijan'. When Gandhi championed the cause of Scheduled Castes, he for the first time encountered a SC person, who by dint of hard work, selfless service championing the cause of upliftment of untouchables had emerged as its spokesman and leader.

Ambedkar goes down in history as a self-made valiant leader who emerged at a time when his services were most needed by the nation and community. Historically he belonged to the first generation of leaders among untouchables whose mission in life consisted in fighting against age old traditions and religion which upheld suppression of large sections of population who were treated worse than animals.

The philosophy and justification for the practice of untouchability was revolting and in his writings Ambedkar indicted Hinduism, caste system and the philosophy behind them as inhuman, extremely unjust. The strong leader in Ambedkar compelled the Congress and Gandhi to recognise the need for bestowing enough attention to the cause and problems of untouchables probably it is no exaggeration to state that but for Ambedkar and the political predicament in which the leaders of the National Congress were involved, neither Congress nor its leaders would have ever thought of the untold miseries and age-old sufferings of the untouchables.

Ambedkar was leader of the SC communities in his own right. His sharp intellect, legal mind, the humiliations he suffered at the hands of caste Hindus did not repel him, but encouraged him to voice the fears and hopes of the community in the hands of the castes. Ambedkar emerged almost from a scrap and he combined in himself the qualities of a charismatic

leader rebellious and uncompromising, denouncing the old and attempting to find a new order.

Ambedkar's political leadership is an accepted and widely acknowledged fact in Indian national life. In the initial stages his leadership was confined to fight for civil rights. He led many delegations and guided Depressed classes in their activities concerned with temple entry and establishing schools and hostels. His leadership begins with determination to fight for political rights. He foresaw the conditions of untouchables in Hindu-run Indian society and was determined to raise the economic, educational and political status of untouchables. He believed that constitutional safeguards, special representation as the only way out for the upliftment of untouchables. If he had not thought so and fought for the political rights, no other person would have dared as much as he did to argue convincingly in the Round Table Conference.

Ambedkar, himself an untouchable Mahar of Maharashtra. He was able to get the benefits of higher education including training abroad in America and England. He had travelled widely and was an intellectual and scholar of eminence. Hinduism and caste came in for heavy attack in the hands of Ambedkar and he systematically exposed the cruelty of man to man in the name of religion and caste. He devoted his life for the welfare of the Depressed classes. His life was a series of struggle, not for obtaining any political gain but to get the minimum conditions of existence for the untouchables. He was born with a mission and he carried it out. The pathetic conditions of untouchables worried him till he breathed his last.

Ambedkar was the spokesman of the weaker sections, the poor, downtrodden, poverty-stricken community without any caste, creed or religious considerations. He was not happy with the way Hindu women were treated and exploited. He introduced the Hindu Code Bill. However, a unique opportunity to change under law the basic framework of the Hindu society on more liberal patterns suited to modern conditions and times is lost. Also he showed great capacity for organizing the labourers. In fact, he founded the Labour Party in Bombay



and argued vehemently for the betterment of the living conditions of labourers. Thus, he was not only an intellectual and scholar but also an active social reformer who believed in action.

In the first decade of post-independence India, between 1947-1957, Ambedkar as a constitution writer was able to give shape to some of his ideas to safeguard the interests of the untouchables. Some constitutional provisions were provided for the political representation, economic betterment and educational facilities to SCs/STs. Although India became a Secular Democratic Republic, the practice of untouchability a cognizable offence, Ambedkar was not satisfied with mere 'paper guarantees'. To the end of his life he was uncompromising and that was with reference to Hinduism, caste system and its philosophy justifying graded inequality. Stripped off the opportunity to provide effective political leadership, Ambedkar still provided leadership. He did have a large number of followers from among the rank and file of untouchables, though his stature was steadily undermined towards the end. He took up cudgels against one of the most populous world religions which knew no defeat but gained plasticity to include all and sundry, conflicting as well as contradictory religious ideologies and practices. Apart from the religious susceptibility and ignorance of the people of his kind, Ambedkar had chosen to attack superiors. Any system, be it religious, political, economic or intellectual, the superior sub-system will develop built-in mechanisms to absorb shocks and onslaughts, if it is not able to totally crush such attempts. Ambedkar perhaps realised this too that his protest against Hindu tyranny was not even a drop in the ocean. His life mission caused some temporary ripples in the vast span of Hinduism and there it ended.

Ambedkar believed that as the process of modernization sets in, acquired status and values associated with it should gradually displace values and status based on ascription. The tensions which we are witnessing in contemporary India between the SCs and non-SCs may be described as a clash between traditional and emergent values.

Under the Democratic constitution in present day India, it is well known how castes are matched to fight elections while the communal organizations and demand for adequate representation are on the increase. The party leadership has an obligation and vested interest to maintain. In fact, a good number of Indian political parties conform to the patterns of caste system in the country.

The SC politician of today who gets elected from reserved constituency do not particularly represent SC interests as much as he fulfills a constitutional requirement. At best or worse, he represents the interest of his constituency and is under no special obligation to SC people and their problems. The leaders remain subordinate to the party bosses. But small wonder how he wakes up periodically to the problems, the moment he is threatened with the idea of loss of privileged position in the event of abolition of reservation. Majority of the 'hand-picked' SC politicians have become unapproachable and conduct themselves as 'neo-Brahmins' towards the rank and file. The SC politicians do not wish to be identified as SC leaders. The access to power enhances the secular status and rank of SC political leaders. Hence the class mass differences are inevitable amongst themselves.

In the post-Ambedkar era absence of effective leadership among SCs is a tragedy. An ambitious and aspiring SC politician can be cut underneath his feet. Rivalry and putting one against another, exploiting sub-caste differences are powerful methods to contain them.

The constitutional guarantees so far have reached only the fringe of the community and have in no way solved the problems. While the masses of untouchables in rural parts remain illiterate, ignorant and are ill-treated the same way, the power mongering politicians, the vocal few, the educated and the officials are reaping most of the benefits. These are the people who have also acquired other forms of assets, influence and wield some power. Every effort made by the government to create opportunities to make the SC economically viable and sound have led to increased jealousy and hatred among



the non-scheduled castes. All these are conceived as a direct threat to undermine the upper castes. Slightest attempts on the part of the SCs to assert themselves and claims for constitutional privileges have led to clashes. The government machinery is inadequate and too slow to move even under emergent conditions. Therefore, when clashes occur, it is the weaker sections who are put to plight and often relieved of everything including life.

After the exit of Ambedkar attempts to organize the Scheduled Castes are continued. But only in Maharashtra it succeeded to some extent. During his life time Ambedkar tried and organized labour party, then Scheduled Caste Federation and finally the Republican Party of India. One after another ? these organizations did not have a smooth sailing. In recent years, a younger generation sprang up in the name of Dalit Panthers. They made themselves felt. Elsewhere SC youths have also come under their influence. But in Maharashtra itself the Dalit Panthers Movement was closed in from many sides. Some of the leaders were lured by the ruling party. Only in literary field some of them remain active today. Community based political organizations especially of the down-trodden have little success, while in general parties SC leadership itself is jettisoned. A very pathetic situation indeed.

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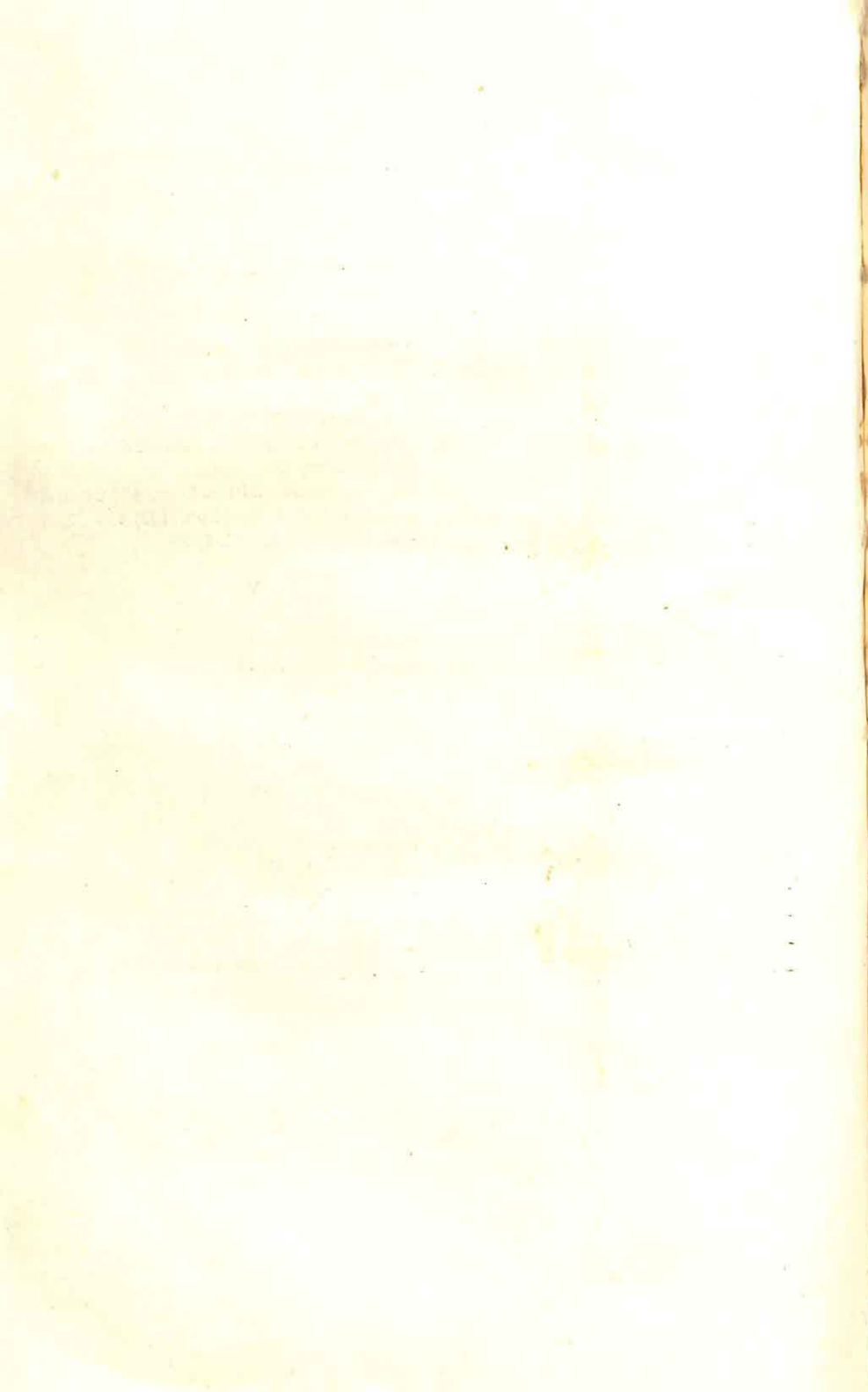
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